AMBERZINE

Issue #7 • July • 1994 • Ten Dollars

Amberzine 7

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Postmaster
Send address changes to Amberzine, P.O. Box 519, Detroit, Michigan, 48231-0519.

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Subscriptions
Rates are $10 for a single issue, or $40 for a five-issue subscription. Foreign subscribers (including Canada) should pay in U.S. dollars drawn on a U.S. bank. To subscribe, or to change the address of a subscription, please write to Phage Press, P.O. Box 519, Detroit, Michigan, 48231-0519, USA.

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About the Cover

The cover art, by Mark Riley LeBay, depicts Merlin's nightmare in Chapter 10 of Trumps of Doom. *(The relevant passage is excerpted on the back cover.)*

Mark did the original composition in pencil, then scanned the sketch into a Macintosh computer and worked on it using Adobe Photoshop. The artwork was sent directly to film at 2540dpi, and then to print. As I write this, I have not yet seen it in hardcopy form.

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Editor's Remarks

Joseph M. Saul

I originally planned to do a full-sized editorial for this issue, wherein I ranted and raved about prevalent beliefs within the Amber community, expounded on my own ideas, and generally engaged in a bit of rabble-rousing.

I won't, though. If you really want to know my views on the alleged supremacy of diceless gaming for all purposes, Good and Bad Stuff, Strength vs. Warfare, ethical GMing, literal interpretation of game rules, or anything else, you can look me up at a convention or send me e-mail. (My e-mail address is seldon@m-net.arbornet.org.)

If you want to know my views on *Amberzine*, you need only look at the issue you hold in your hands.

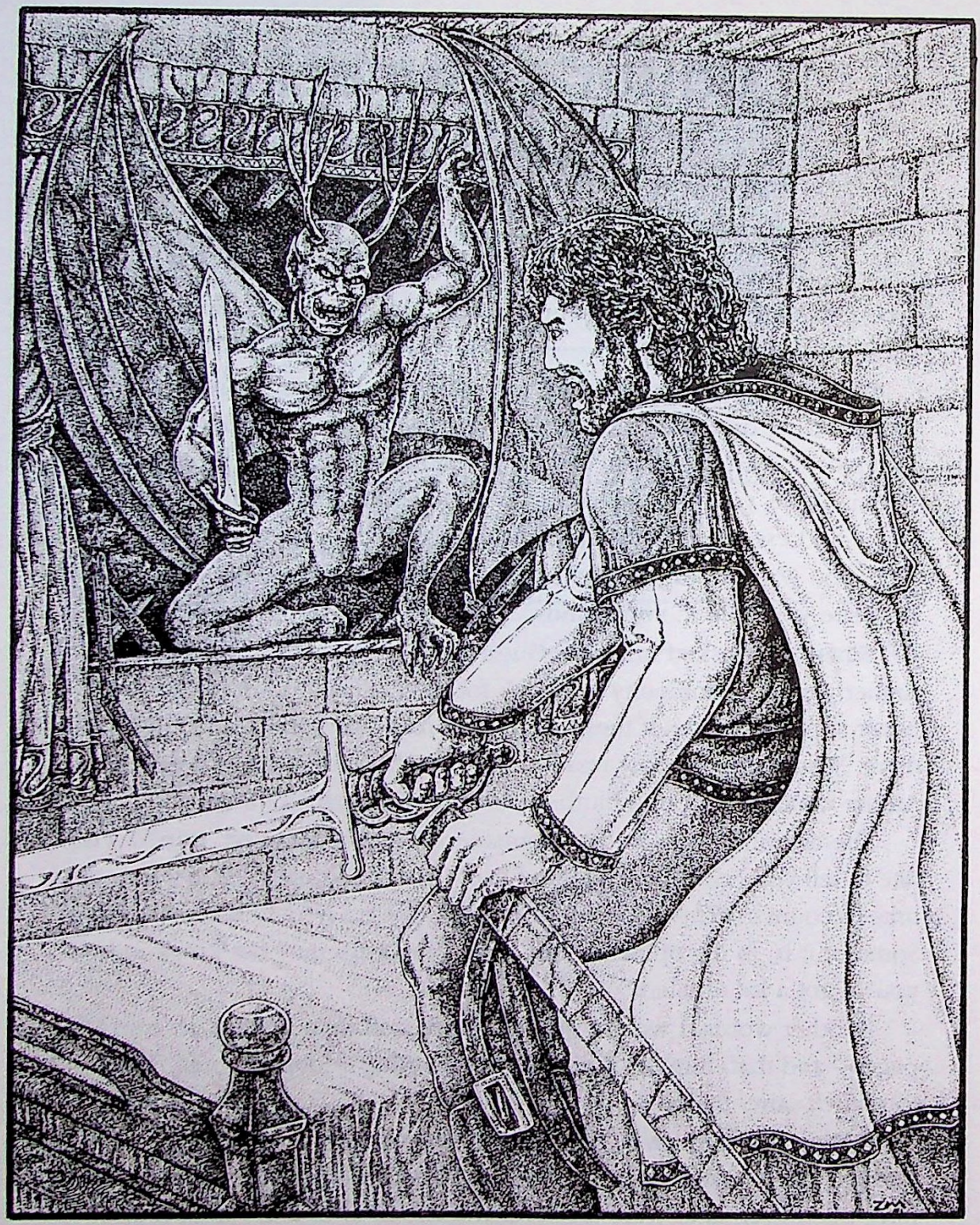
When Erick asked me to be Guest Editor, I decided to go out into the Amber gaming community and look for new talent—people who had never seen the inside of these pages before. I knew there was talent out there. What I *didn't* know was just how much. I sent out messages on the Amber e-mail list. I put a blurb in *Amberzine*. I spread the word.

The response was almost instantaneous. I got swamped. Buried. I'd like to tell you how many pages of stuff I got, but frankly I don't have the time to count it. (This issue is late enough as it is.) A lot of it is even good. Some of it is, in my opinion, very good. You guys may not know it, but you've got a lot of talent.

In other words, I wound up with more stuff than I could get into 192 pages—and that, frankly, is why I'm not writing a long editorial. There's too much other material I'd rather print.

During the time I was working on *Amberzine 7*, I was also going through my first year of law school. That's why this is late—but it would have been even later were it not for the efforts of Lisa Leutheuser and Simone Cooper, brilliant writers and editors both, who helped me sort through manuscripts and edit them into final form. My thanks to them.

And thanks to all of you, for making this issue not only possible—but necessary. Keep it up.



An essay questioning the validity of the link between Stuff and character personality—the idea that good and evil are somehow linked to luck. What can I say? If Jack hadn't written it, I would have had to.

When Good Stuff Happens to Bad People

Jack Gulick

I struggled with the chains, and I thought I could break them. But I was tired and my head still ached. And there were a couple dozen of the guards, with sharply curved swords and what looked like some sort of lamellar armor. I'd take my chances wherever they were taking me, because I knew my chances here were slim. Hopefully the local lord would be more understanding of a stranger's petty theft than his guards would. But with the number of people near starving just outside the rich orchard's walls, I wasn't expecting much in the way of mercy.

And then I looked up into cold blue eyes I knew too damn well and my heart sank.

"Kyle." I said his name, breaking the spell cast when our eyes met. And I looked away, not wanting to see any more. It brought up memories of something too important, lost to me now. Thanks to him.

He simply smiled, that smug smile he got when things were going his way. The last I'd seen of him was the underside of his Alfa-Romeo as it went over an ocean-side cliff. I'd hoped then that it was the last time, but I had known better than to hold my breath.

"Leave us. I would like to talk with the thief first, before I take word of this to his Majesty."

The captain scowled slightly, making it clear this was an odd request, but Kyle gave him that look of his that demanded obedience. With only the slightest delay, it was him and me, together again. Only I was hungry, bruised and chained, and he was clean, healthy, and looking a bit too well-fed.

"Have you really sunk so low, dearest cousin? Petty theft in shadow and not even the capacity to escape the law? How the tides have shifted..."

I caught my breath while he explained his own position. While he gloated. He had escaped death by Italian car (he didn't say how and I didn't interrupt him to ask) and made his way into shadow, ending up here. Surprise—the king had fallen ill soon after, passing his every wish through his trusted new advisor. The snake still had his poisons and still played the same game, for smaller stakes now.

"I was planning to lie low for a while. Enjoy a quiet, comfortable life and only dedicate myself to a bit of revenge afterwards. But now you're here of your own accord, and I can hardly pass that up, can I?"

I was sure he couldn't. He had never passed up a chance to twist a blade unless there was something in it for him. He had wormed his way into Random's trust, and that was no easy thing for anyone to do. The collateral damage when he finally moved included Amber's relations with three Golden Circle shadows, more blood then I like to remember, and my chance to go home again. Too much of what he had done ended up pinned on me. He'd set me up, tricked me, and I'd walked into it.

He must have read my thoughts in my face, because his smile took that nasty twitch I remembered all too clearly.

"Ahh, Harold, I do so love family reunions. And how are things in Amber?"

I caught him off-guard when I rushed forward, which just proved he was still just as overconfident as always. But the guards were back before I could leave any lasting injuries. I think I blackened an eye, though. I knew I'd pay for that, because the rat valued his own pretty face above most other people's lives, but he always got to me. I never could see why everyone else imagined they could trust him.

The cell he picked for me was dark and damp, and I knew I wouldn't see the outside of it for some time to come. He left me a card for company, though. My own, with Amber's towers visible over my shoulder, out of reach now. I couldn't help but admire the craft he put to cruelty, even if it just made me hate him more.

And I knew this was only the beginning.

• • •

"Taking Good Stuff means declaring that your character is basically a 'good guy.'"

"[A] character with Bad Stuff has a sinister, evil appearance."

That's what the rulebook says. And when I first read those words, I felt a tiny shiver going up my spine.

Is that all there is? Is the multiverse of Amber really so good and fair that luck actually works toward the good and against the bad? Does good stuff happen only to good people and bad stuff to bad? It surely does sound appealing, somehow quite terribly, cosmically fair.

But is it *Amber?*

Does it account for Luke, or Caine, or even Corwin—who gladly put their own interests before the good of others and who still seem to get more than their share of good breaks, favorable reactions from minor characters and all the other trappings (except the "good guy" veneer) that go with Good Stuff?

When Corwin finishes his transformation from self-admitted manipulative bastard, a man who reveled in the discomfort his curse had brought to Eric and plotted invasion despite Gerard's plea (the Corwin of *Nine Princes in Amber* and *Guns of Avalon*) to a character willing to risk it all to save Amber and shadow (the much more heroic Corwin of *Courts of Chaos*), *that* is when his past and all the distrust he has sown come back to haunt him. When he was bad, he got away with it. When he turned himself around, his every misdeed magnified into disaster. Becoming a "good guy" coincided with his fortunes turning sour.

If you were the player going through this and you stepped back to look at it, you would swear you had gone from being the beneficiary of Good Stuff to the victim of Bad Stuff as the world around you swaps from ally to enemy. And, from a purely mechanical viewpoint, you'd be right. But the character change we see is exactly the opposite, going from bad to good. How can this be?

To be honest, all that is a lesser problem than the one that first came to mind when I saw the words quoted above. What came to my mind was how much this *limited* a player's ability to design characters. It was taking a game concept, the measure of a character's luck, and linking it to a very central part of the character's personality. Isn't this sort of limiting game

stricture exactly the sort of thing diceless gaming is supposed to free players from?

It's simple, really. The links between Good Stuff and goodness and between Bad Stuff and badness are inappropriate. They fail to reflect Zelazny and, as much as I'd wish this weren't the case, fail to reflect real life. All they serve to do is rule out certain character types, which is hardly beneficial to role-playing. Where, in this rule, can we find room for the doomed tragic hero whose every good deed vanishes with the breeze but to whom every slander of an enemy is all but magically attracted? Where is the room for, say, King Arthur (to step outside Amber, since it's hard to find examples of true "good guy" altruism in Amber)? On the other side, where is the room for the rogue who stays, always, three steps ahead of the posse, whose natural charm guarantees the initial moment of doubt and who never, ever is still around when all the pigeons come home to roost? Where, I have to ask, can we fit Luke? It's not all just his ready salesmanship. Even people who should be smart enough to know better give Luke the benefit of the doubt that first time.

No, I'm afraid it has to go. The invaluable tool that is Stuff needs to be separated from the character's good or bad nature. Good people can have bad luck. Bad people can have good luck. An absolute villain can have innate charm, charisma, and good fortune while a noble hero can be greeted with suspicion and disaster everywhere he goes. Zelazny uses it, allowing characters Corwin or Merlin consider horrible villains to slip away because either the hand of Fate or those of other, more corporal allies assist them. A lucky, well-liked villain is, after all, much harder to deal with and the unjustly put-upon hero far more satisfying to struggle to victory with.

Now, don't get me wrong. Good Stuff doesn't mean everything works any more than Bad Stuff means everything fails. Good Stuff gives a bad person an initial trust to abuse, a moment's warning to start an escape just as things are about to fall apart. Bad Stuff gives a good character a wall of distrust to overcome and a tragic history to fight to redeem himself from. Neither will insulate a character from the enemies they make by their actions.

Kyle, in the passage at the beginning, is a bad character with Good Stuff. Good fortune prevents him from reaping the full return of what he

does, but it doesn't mean Harold has to like him. It doesn't mean Random will forget being used. Eventually, Kyle will run out of excuses and tricks and it will all come to a messy end because that's good storytelling, but until then he slips by always a second ahead of disaster.

Harold, the narrator, is just the opposite. His motives are true and selfless, but things go wrong. He has to fight to win people's trust (not because he is in any way "evil" or "sinister" but just because fate works against him to leave bad impressions in everyone's mind) and association with a disaster means years to live it down. Even something mundane like poaching a royal orchard can just be an invitation for trouble. Eventually, if he fights hard and uses what few breaks he gets, the truth may come out and he might be restored to what he lost. But it won't be easy.

All this is not to say characters with Good and Bad stuff can't be exactly like it says in the Amber Diceless rule book. On the contrary, they can easily be such and can be great fun to play. But there is really no reason to limit yourself to just that. Why not try your hand at a teflon-clean, silver-tongued rascal out to exploit her good fortune or a narrow-eyed, shifty-seeming sort who conceals a heart of gold? It can only broaden your horizons.

After all, if you've gotten this far in Amber, you know it's often a good start to break—or at least seriously bend—the rules. This one begs to be bent a *lot.*

Go on. Try it. It won't hurt.

Trust me.

Jack Gulick *(a.k.a. The Ghoul, 71150.2105@CompuServe.com) was introduced to Amber Diceless in Dazzler's Children of Amber pre-publication playtest in CompuServe's Role-Playing Games Forum. He still plays and runs Amber there, as well as serving as editor for the forum's monthly gaming 'zine.*

Outside gaming, he works as an actuarial analyst designing and testing systems support for a major life insurance company, which probably explains a lot of things.

Vivisecting the Jewel of Judgment

Christopher King

...the buckling, the flickering, the weaving of all that I could see of it, everywhere about me, made me wonder whether three dimensions were sufficient to account for the senses-warping complexities with which I was confronted... And out, through, over, and done, in a blaze of ruddy light... (*Sign of the Unicorn*, Chapter 3)

I once again tried to encompass the totality of this Pattern and was lost once more in what seemed its extra-dimensional convolutions. Great curves and spirals and knotted-seeming traceries wound before us... It was as if we negotiated the luminous interior of an enormous and elaborately convoluted seashell. (*The Courts of Chaos*, Chapter 13)

Many Amber players seem to think that the Primal Pattern was generated by passing a plane through the Jewel of Judgment. This view has aesthetic appeal, in that if you move the plane in relation to the Jewel, you would get a different Pattern. Unfortunately, it is also inaccurate — there is no way it could be implemented.

There is also another common view, which Erick Wujcik related to me as he was refuting my arguments. This view is that the Jewel Pattern is inscribed upon a three-dimensional shell, like a sphere or ellipsoid. You could then pass a plane through the center, and the projection would be a flat Pattern. This alternative threw me for a while. Yes, it would work. I believe he got the idea from the last sentence in the second quote. If you think of tracing all the surfaces of a seashell, however, you will see that there are lines *within* the shell—not just on its inner surface.

To sum up, the Jewel of Judgment basically consists of a huge, incredibly complex, three-dimensional squiggle which happens to be contained within a regular three-dimensional shape, say an ellipsoid (the Pattern, after all, is elliptical). I will limit the discussion to three dimensions

for simplicity, though higher-dimensional Patterns present intriguing possibilities.

What, then, is the Primal Pattern that Dworkin drew upon the stone? My theory is that it is Dworkin's *interpretation* of what lay in the Jewel, a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional object — just like a painting of a tree. This is why Corwin's Pattern is similar to Dworkin's. They are basically illustrations, attempts to grasp the essence of, the same thing.

Yet, if it is only an interpretation, what prevents you from using the Jewel to draw Pattern graffiti? Random lines anywhere you want? The reason you cannot do this is because you are psychically bonded with the Jewel of Judgment. It seems to control your movements once you start making the Pattern. Corwin said he moved slowly, almost in a ritual manner. It is Corwin's "unknown agency" which provides him with the Pattern. The Jewel requires his body to make a Pattern, just as Corwin requires the Jewel to make a Pattern. In fact, he says so explicitly: "In a sense, I suppose, I was obliterated. I became a moving point, programmed by the Jewel, performing an operation which absorbed me so totally that I had no attention available for self-consciousness. Yet, at some level, I realized that I was a part of the process, also." (*The Courts of Chaos*, Chapter 9.)

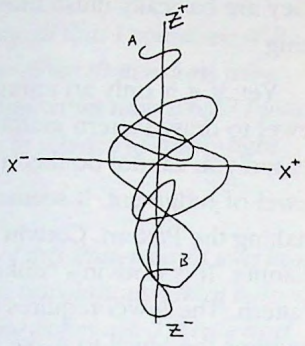
When an Amberite walks the Pattern, he or she is inscribed with it. Once inscribed, he or she can bring it to mind and use it as desired. However, the Pattern is also inscribed with an image of that Amberite, which it can then call up and use as it wishes. The Jewel of Judgment has similar properties, and it would make sense that inscribing a Pattern with it is the closest form of bonding available. Perhaps this is the "higher initiation" that Jewel-possessed Coral forbade Merlin to take.

The Pattern, then, is a visible link, or symbol, between its creator and the power of the Jewel of Judgment. It is through the Pattern that the creator has access to the Jewel's powers out in shadow without the Jewel itself. As we all know, a Pattern becomes a link for anyone who is a direct descendant of the creator as well, and once again we have a new set of shadow Patterns (like Rebma, Amber, etc.), and another grouping of shadows as long as there is a polar opposite to support the shadow.

Vivisecting the Jewel of Judgment
Illustrations

1

2a



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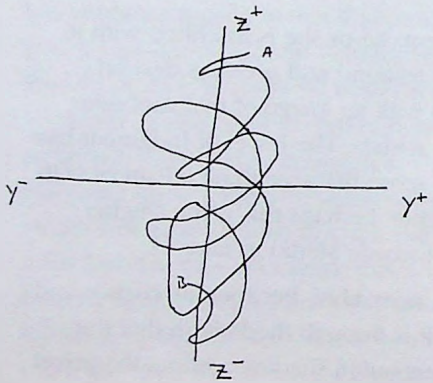

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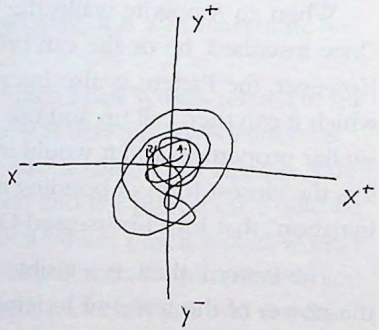


Going on to wilder speculation, what would happen if you *could* pass a plane through the Jewel Pattern? What would be on that plane? You would get several dots and possibly a small line, if the Jewel Pattern happened to be parallel to the plane at some point (Figure 1). If you could generate it with the Jewel—you'd need some serious shape shifting!—what would it do? One possibility is that it would evoke only a certain aspect of the Jewel's power. Thus, the Pattern would be drawn for one particular purpose. Perhaps this fictitious Pattern was created to boost the regular Pattern's ability to produce and maintain ghosts. Maybe it would be created to affect Trump power, limiting their use.

What about creating a projection? As you can see from the figures, you would wind up with a twisting line that would cross itself many times. Perhaps this "fuller" description of the Jewel Pattern inscribed on two dimensions would give the person who could walk it extended Pattern abilities. Of course, every time the new Pattern crossed itself, there would probably be an extremely strong veil. Even in my simple representation (Figure 2), you have up to 14 crossings! You would probably need highly ranked characteristics to even have a chance of walking such a Pattern.

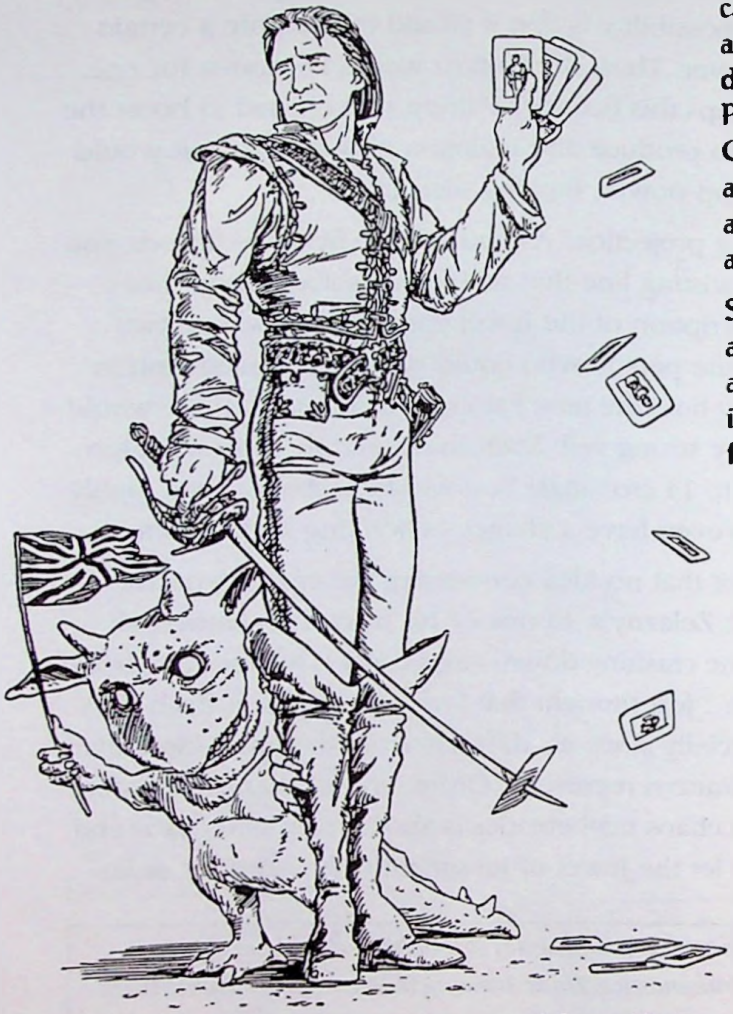
In conclusion, I admit that no idea concerning the creation of the Pattern is likely to match Zelazny's. In one of his next short stories, all of these ideas may well come crashing down—especially if he does one from Dworkin's point of view. I just thought that I would suggest a fresh idea from a math major, especially since it's different from the other ideas that I've heard. After all, the Pattern represents Order, and mathematics orders the universe for us (even chaos mathematics is about contained chaos and probability). So why not let the Jewel of Judgment truly stand for order?

Christopher King *has just completed a B.S. with a double major in Computer Science and Mathematics. He is working as a computer technician. When not toying with computers (or writing Amber diaries!) he can often be seen in musicals around Chicago. He is also trying to publish a DRPG called Underworld, perhaps with Phage. Amidst it all, he continues his education, working on a M.S. in Computer Science and also a M.F.A. in Music Theatre.*

His current favorite quote is "The man who limits his interests limits his life," from Vincent Price, and he happily tries to avoid that pitfall. His e-mail address is grizzly@mcs.com.

HELLRIDER

- An Amber DRPG Fanzine -



Lee Brimmicombe Wood

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2 issues	£3.80 or $5.75
4 issues	£7.20 or $10.90
8 issues	£13.60 or 20.40

Plus postal charges on a per issue basis:

UK	none
Europe	£0.34
U.S.A.	£0.95 or $1.44
Australia	£1.13

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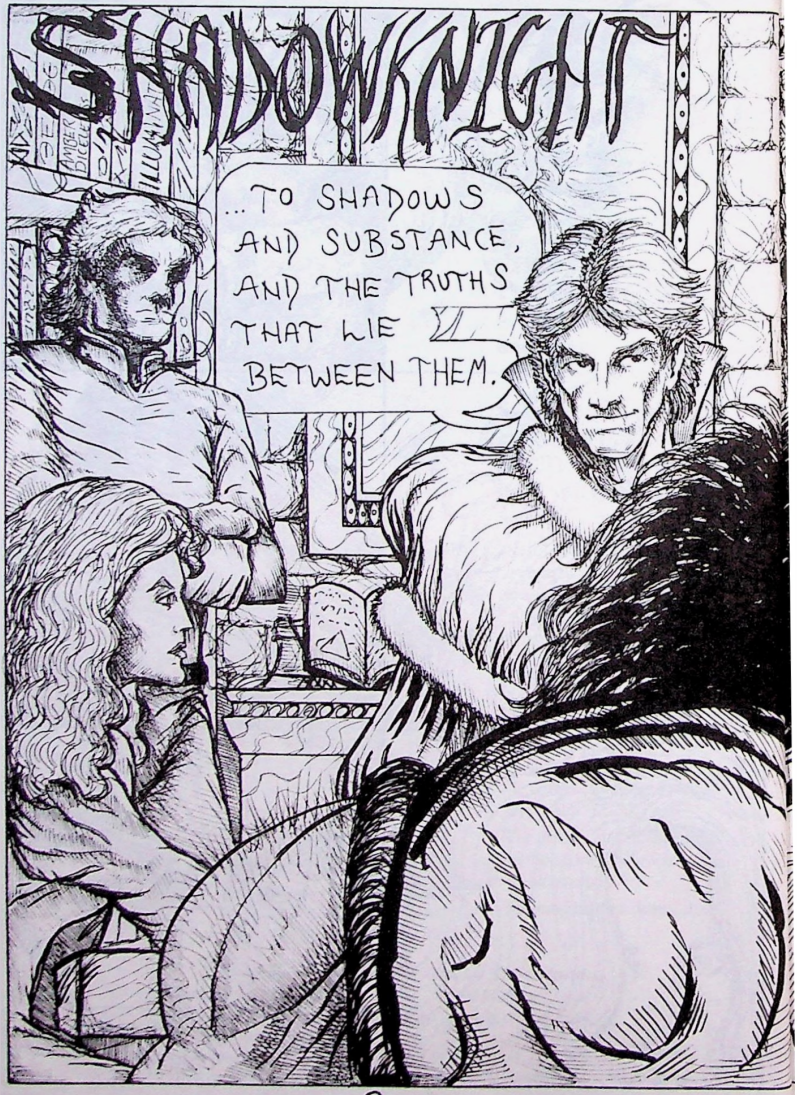
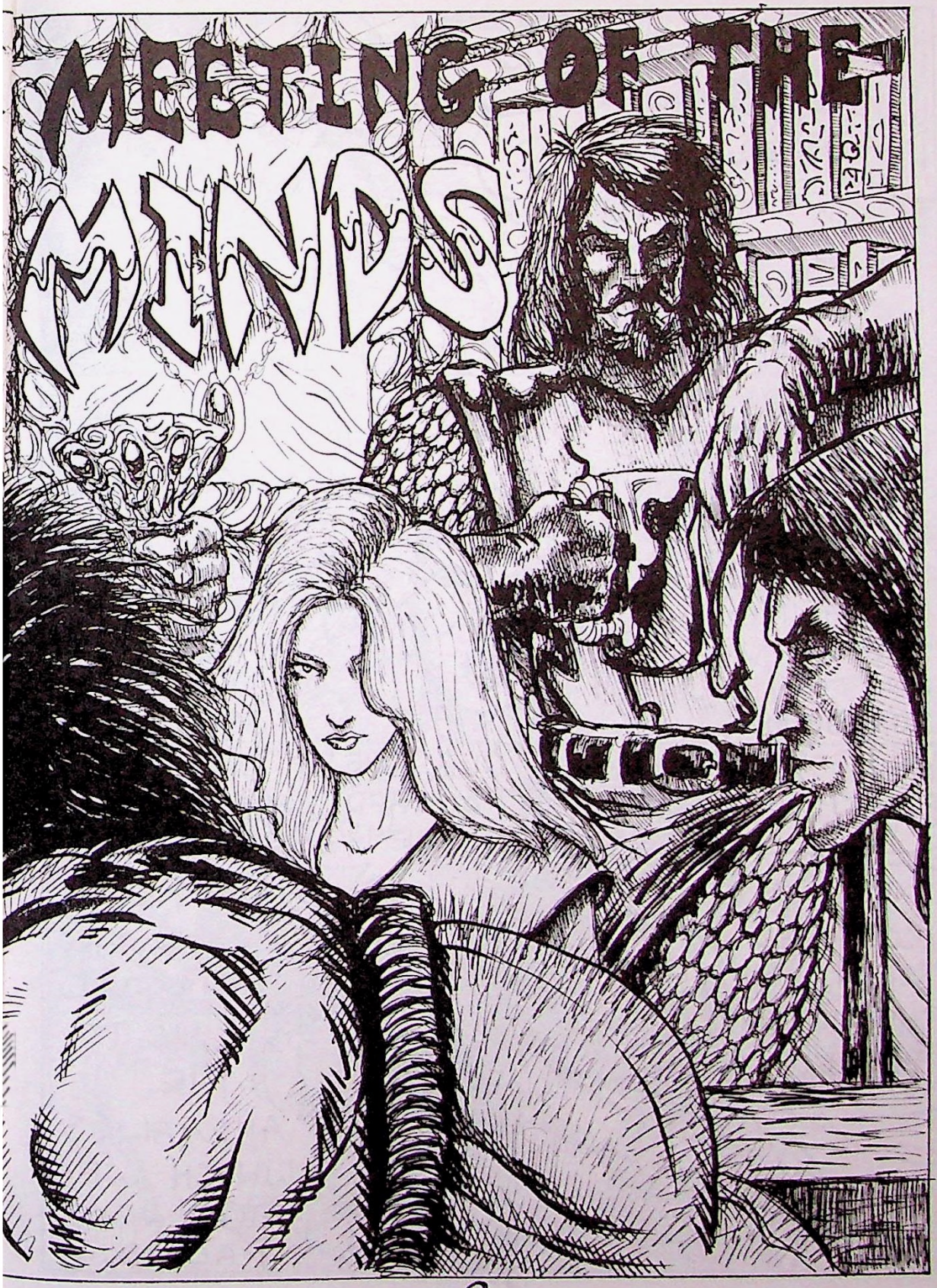
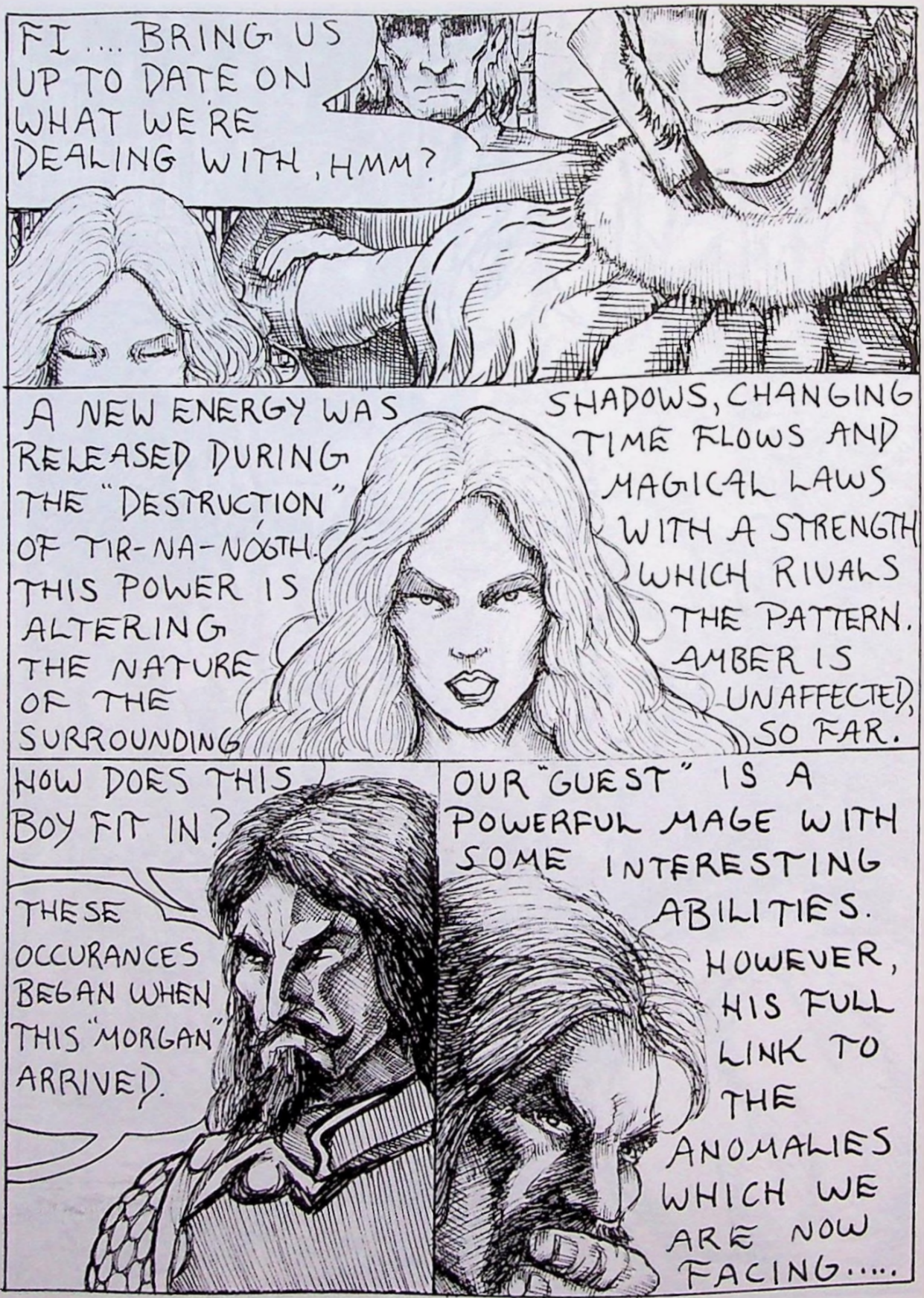
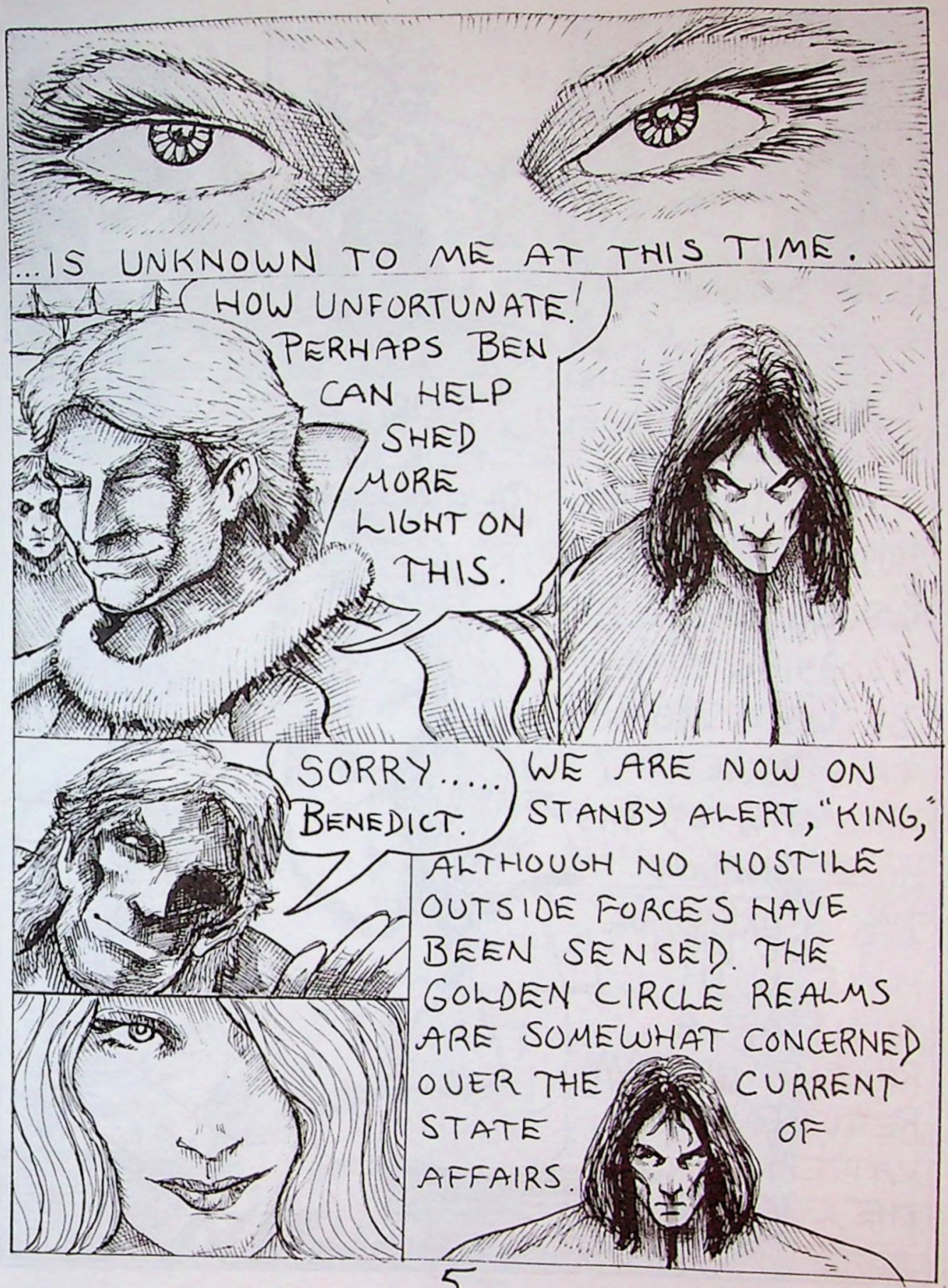
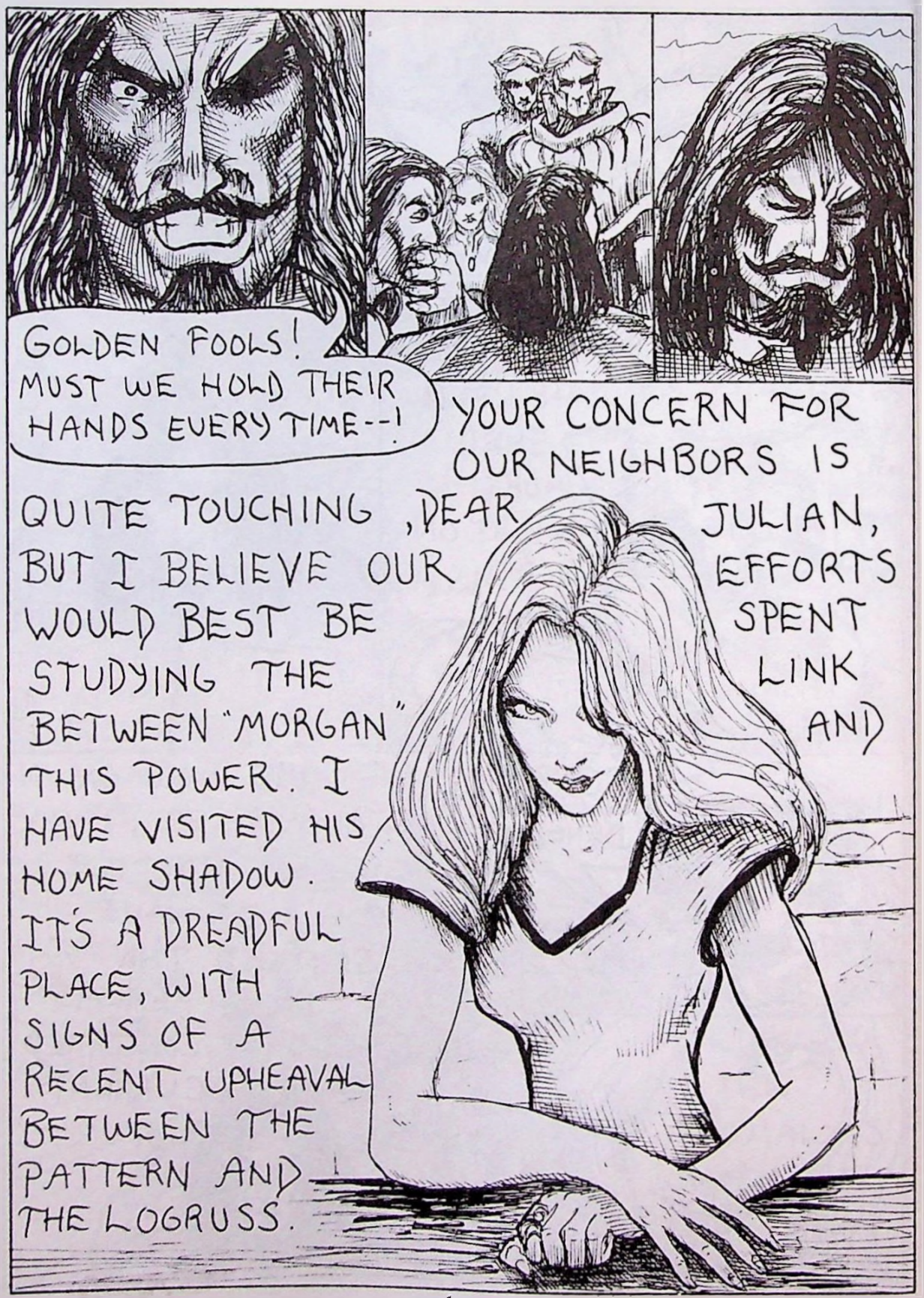
BEFORE WE BEGIN....
A TOAST...

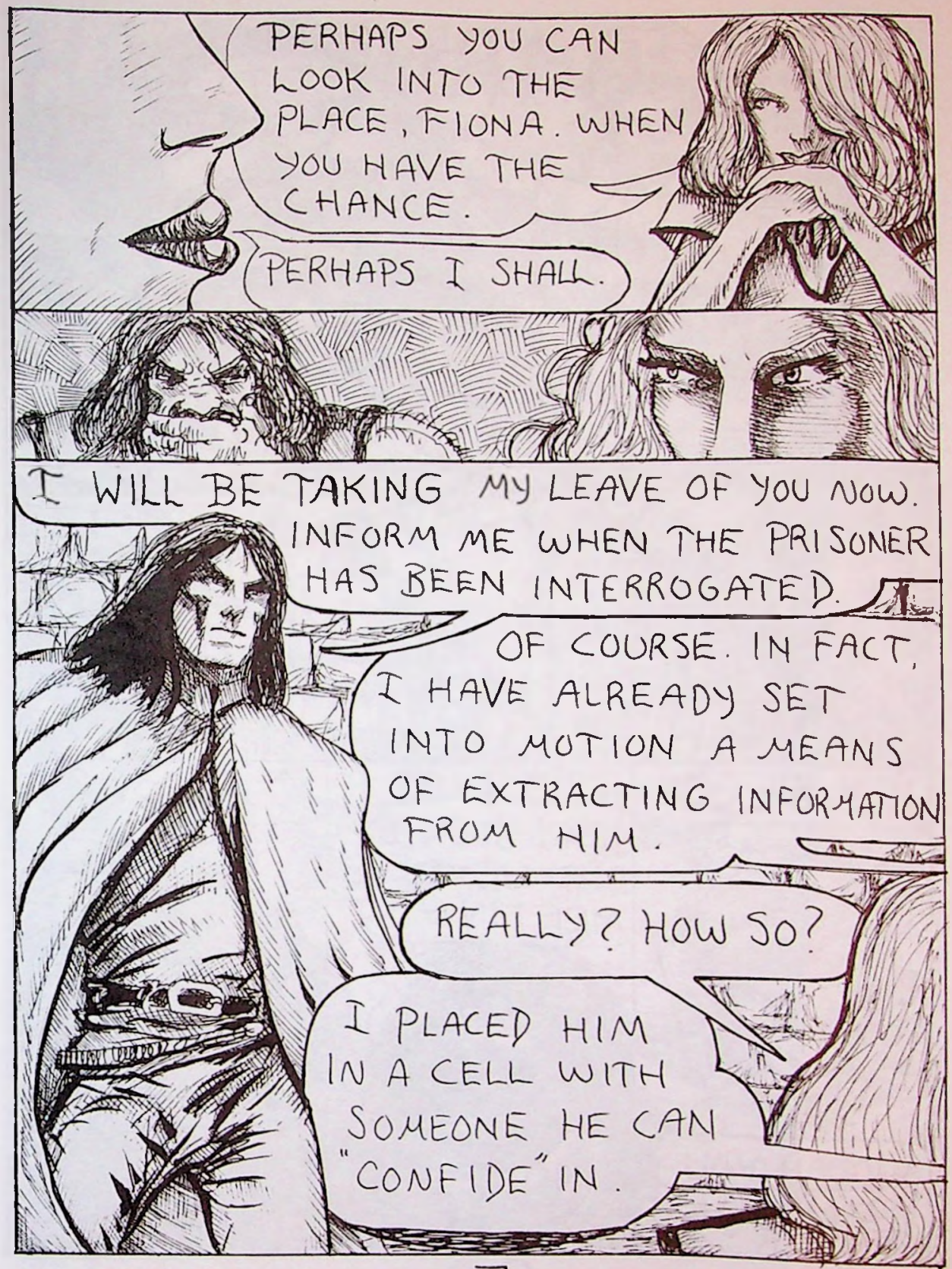

SHADOWKNIGHT
...TO SHADOWS AND SUBSTANCE, AND THE TRUTHS THAT LIE BETWEEN THEM.

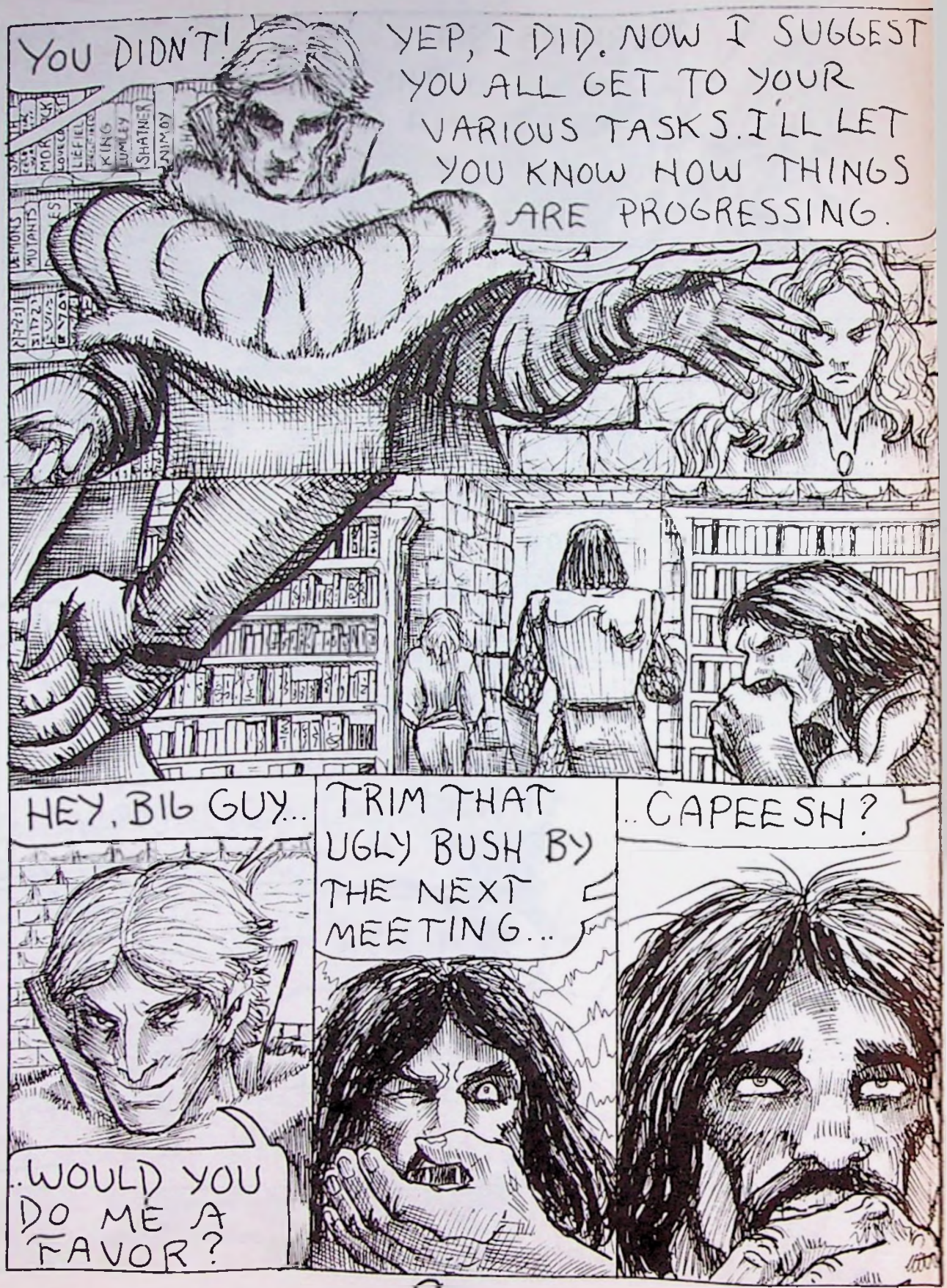

MEETING OF THE
MINDS

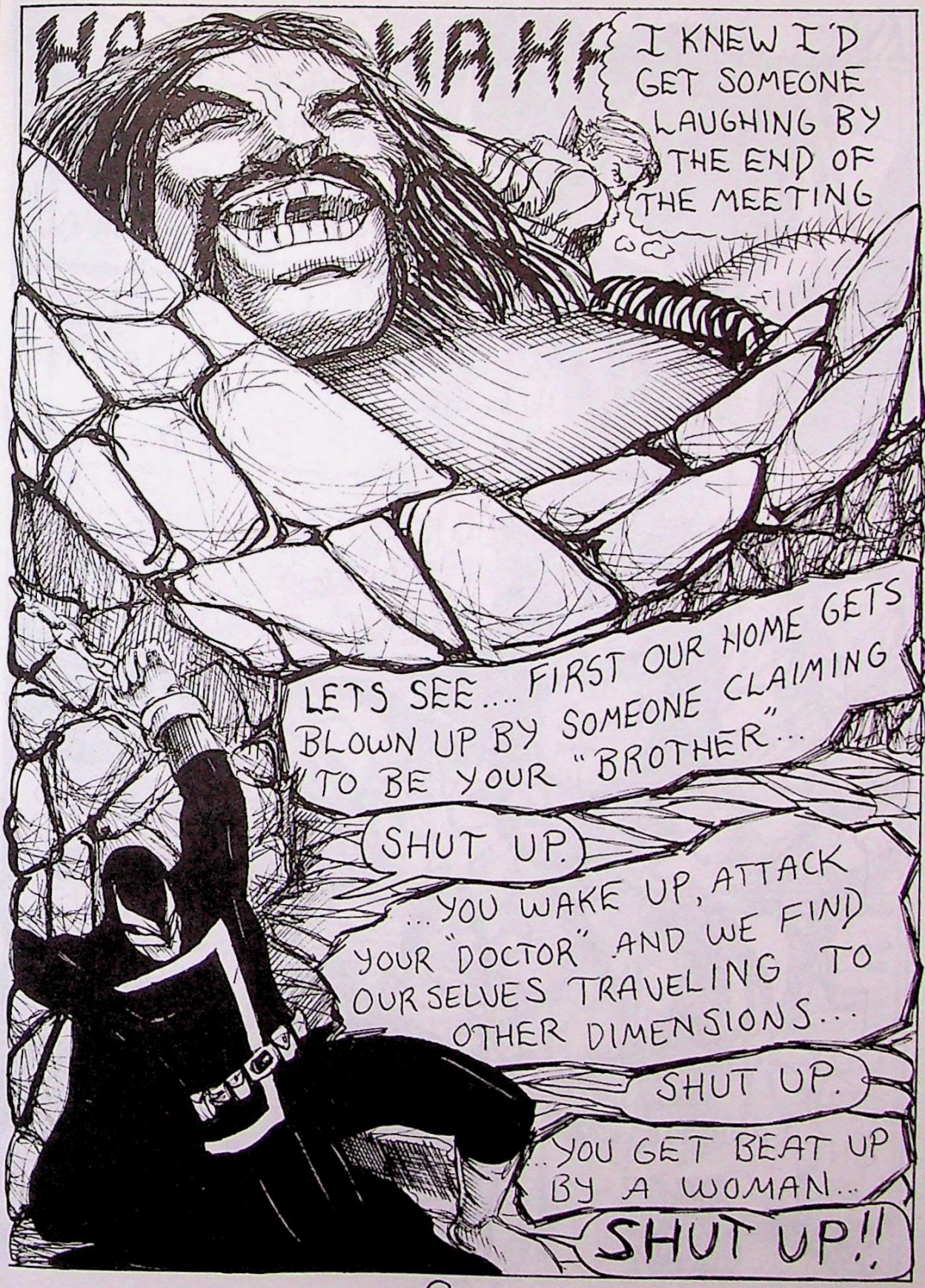

FI.... BRING US UP TO DATE ON WHAT WE'RE DEALING WITH, HMM?
A NEW ENERGY WAS RELEASED DURING THE "DESTRUCTION" OF TIR-NA-NOGTH. THIS POWER IS ALTERING THE NATURE OF THE SURROUNDING SHADOWS, CHANGING TIME FLOWS AND MAGICAL LAWS WITH A STRENGTH WHICH RIVALS THE PATTERN. AMBER IS UNAFFECTED, SO FAR.
HOW DOES THIS BOY FIT IN?
THESE OCCURANCES BEGAN WHEN THIS "MORGAN" ARRIVED.
OUR "GUEST" IS A POWERFUL MAGE WITH SOME INTERESTING ABILITIES. HOWEVER, HIS FULL LINK TO THE ANOMALIES WHICH WE ARE NOW FACING.....

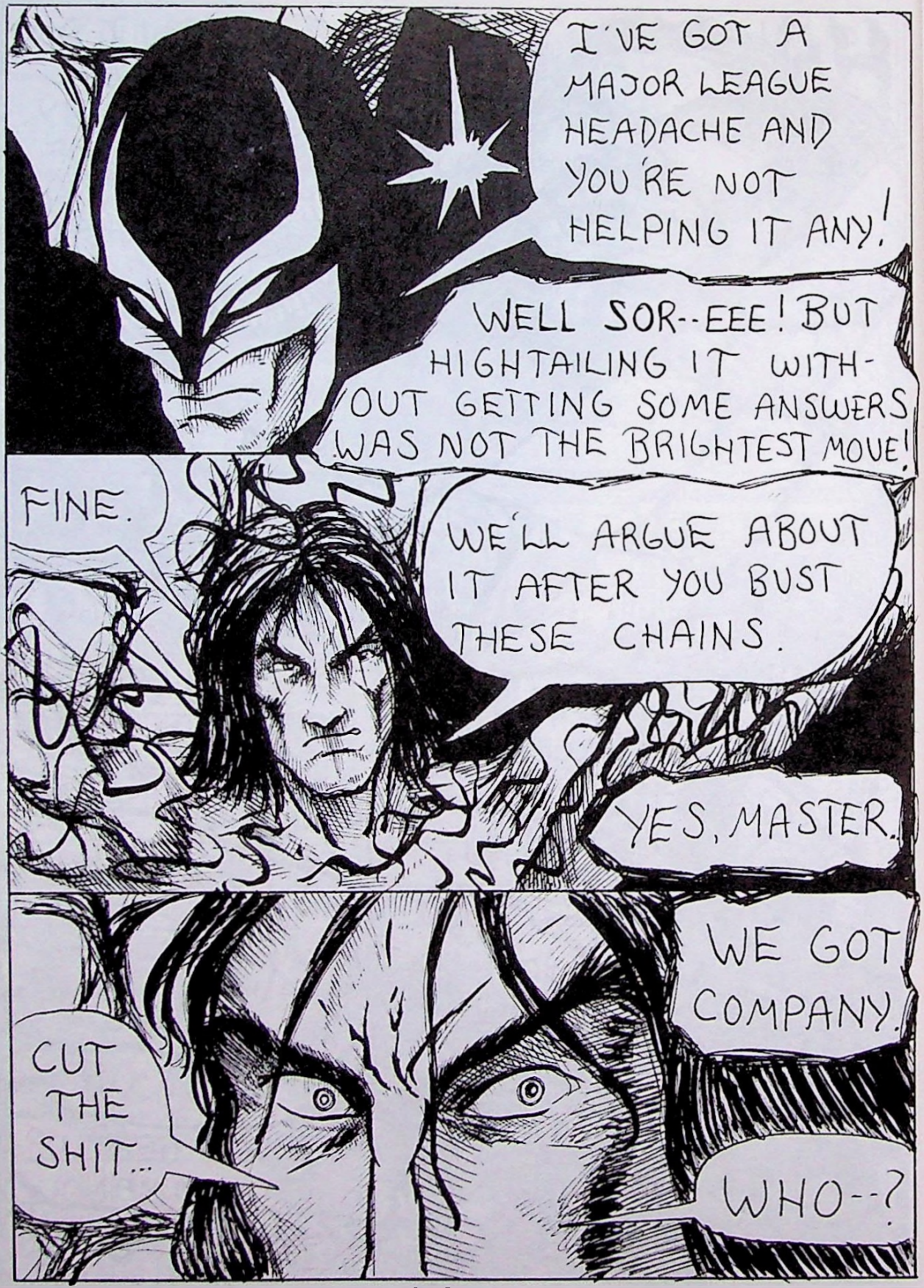

...IS UNKNOWN TO ME AT THIS TIME.
HOW UNFORTUNATE! PERHAPS BEN CAN HELP SHED MORE LIGHT ON THIS.
SORRY..... BENEDICT.
WE ARE NOW ON STANBY ALERT, "KING," ALTHOUGH NO HOSTILE OUTSIDE FORCES HAVE BEEN SENSED. THE GOLDEN CIRCLE REALMS ARE SOMEWHAT CONCERNED OUER THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS.

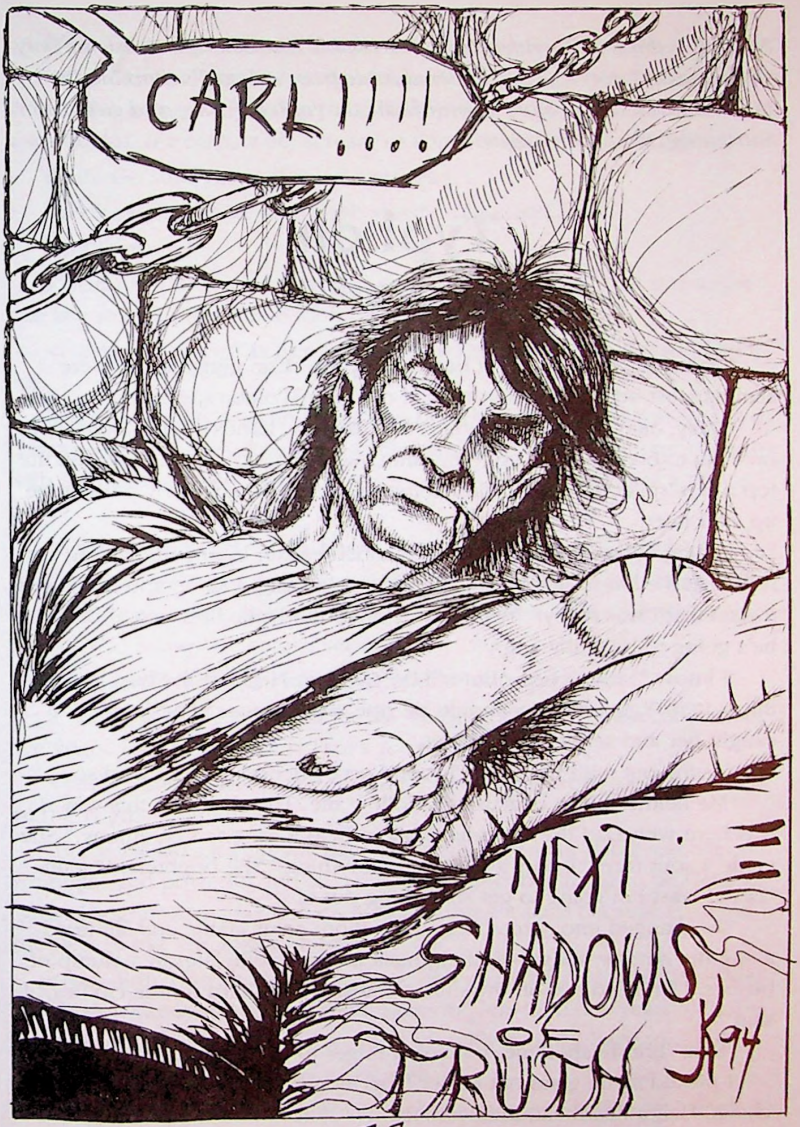

GOLDEN FOOLS! MUST WE HOLD THEIR HANDS EVERY TIME--!
YOUR CONCERN FOR OUR NEIGHBORS IS QUITE TOUCHING, DEAR JULIAN, BUT I BELIEVE OUR EFFORTS WOULD BEST BE SPENT STUDYING THE LINK BETWEEN "MORGAN" AND THIS POWER. I HAVE VISITED HIS HOME SHADOW. IT'S A DREADFUL PLACE, WITH SIGNS OF A RECENT UPHEAVAL BETWEEN THE PATTERN AND THE LOGRUSS.


PERHAPS YOU CAN LOOK INTO THE PLACE, FIONA. WHEN YOU HAVE THE CHANCE.
PERHAPS I SHALL.
I WILL BE TAKING MY LEAVE OF YOU NOW. INFORM ME WHEN THE PRISONER HAS BEEN INTERROGATED.
OF COURSE. IN FACT, I HAVE ALREADY SET INTO MOTION A MEANS OF EXTRACTING INFORMATION FROM HIM.
REALLY? HOW SO?
I PLACED HIM IN A CELL WITH SOMEONE HE CAN "CONFIDE" IN.


YOU DIDN'T!
YEP, I DID. NOW I SUGGEST YOU ALL GET TO YOUR VARIOUS TASKS. I'LL LET YOU KNOW HOW THINGS ARE PROGRESSING.
KING
LUMLEY
SHATNER
ANIMOY
DEMONS
MUTANTS
HEY, BIG GUY...
..WOULD YOU DO ME A FAVOR?
TRIM THAT UGLY BUSH BY THE NEXT MEETING...
..CAPEESH?


HA HA HA
I KNEW I'D GET SOMEONE LAUGHING BY THE END OF THE MEETING
LETS SEE... FIRST OUR HOME GETS BLOWN UP BY SOMEONE CLAIMING TO BE YOUR "BROTHER"...
SHUT UP.
...YOU WAKE UP, ATTACK YOUR "DOCTOR" AND WE FIND OURSELVES TRAVELING TO OTHER DIMENSIONS...
SHUT UP.
...YOU GET BEAT UP BY A WOMAN...
SHUT UP!!


I'VE GOT A MAJOR LEAGUE HEADACHE AND YOU'RE NOT HELPING IT ANY!
WELL SOR--EEE! BUT HIGHTAILING IT WITHOUT GETTING SOME ANSWERS WAS NOT THE BRIGHTEST MOVE!
FINE.
WE'LL ARGUE ABOUT IT AFTER YOU BUST THESE CHAINS.
YES, MASTER.
WE GOT COMPANY.
CUT THE SHIT...
WHO--?


CARL!!!!
NEXT:
SHADOWS
OF
TRUTH
94

Not only is this a well-written story with likable characters, it is also the only "Logrus walk" story I've encountered aside from Zelazny's short Merlin piece. It was written before Bernard saw the "official" one, and gives an intriguing view of the Logrus.

Typhon

Bernard Hsiung

"Come on, Typhon, don't be a spoilsport," Erin giggled. We were standing just outside the border wall of Duke Wolken's estate.

"Okay, okay, here," I grumbled. I crossed my hands so she could stand on them to boost herself up to my shoulders. From there, she reached the top of the spiky barricade, then helped me climb the wall by pulling me up after her.

Getting off on the other side was much easier. I jumped, shifting and rolling in the blood-red grass to soften my landing. I stood and motioned to Erin that I was ready. "You know, Erin, if the Duke finds out about this, he's going to be really angry."

"I know," she agreed. "But it'll be worth it. He's got the best peaches this side of Ygg, and they should be ripe around now." She jumped. I caught her and set her on her feet.

Casting out with my mind, I found no evidence of traps, said so.

"Me neither," Erin concurred. "Follow me. The orchard's this way. I was here with Dad the last time Wolken held a *m'rodess* ceremony." She made a sour face. "It was as boring as anything." She brightened again. "But at least I'm going to get something out of it."

We changed into something a little more comfortable and slithered along the narrow hedges. Shifting back a short while later in a clump of bushes, I brushed dirt off my shirt. "Whew! That's hard on the clothes," I said.

"Shh!" Erin hushed me, holding a finger to her lips.

I picked some grass out of her hair, moved my hand to rest on her cheek. Half a heartbeat, then contact.

<Those trees over there?> I pointed with my other hand.

{Yes. Try to keep an eye out for wardbeasts.}

<You didn't tell me he had wardbeasts!> She grinned. I rolled my eyes. <Okay. I'm going to try to keep the link open. If I can, warn me if *you* see a wardbeast. If I can't, well, scream or something.> My turn to grin.

{Huh. Go stuff yourself in an eggshell.}

I took my finger off her cheek slowly. {Typhon?}

<Still here.>

{Great.} Her center of gravity shifted, then stabilized. {Last one to the tree is a rotting *gryet!*} She took off.

<Hey!> I protested as her laughter filled my mind, then I chased after her.

She was already standing up when I reached the tree. She picked two choice peaches as I shifted back to human form, handed me one of them with a sparkling smile. {Here. You get one too, even if you are a rotting *gryet.*}

<Thanks, Erin. You really know how to make me feel better.>

{Sure. We're bestest friends, right?} A pause as she bit into her peach. She had chosen well; they were juicy, sweet, and tender. {Are you really going to be taking the Logrus soon?}

<Yeah. Father thinks I'm ready. Next bluesky, he said.>

{I wish I was. Daddy won't let his "darling little Erin" try it for another five years. Five whole years! That's *forever*, Typhon!}

<Yeah, I know how you feel. But it's really dangerous too. People *die* on the Logrus, you know.>

{But *your* dad's letting *you* take it. I mean, sure your dad's real big and important and powerful and all, and you're probably going to be Head of House Helgram someday, but it's not fair! I think it's just because I'm a girl.} She looked like she might be ready to cry.

<Hey, Erin, don't be like that. Look, tell you what. If I make it — and I really don't know if I will — and it takes me less than five years to figure it out, I'll take you myself and go through with you, if I have to. Okay?>

{Gee, Typhon, you'd do that for me?}

<Sure. Bestest friends, right? Uh, we'd better get out of here. I think a wardbeast might be just about to check out this part of the orchard.>

We left right before the wardbeast arrived. It spent several minutes sniffing suspiciously at two recently gnawed-upon peach pits, by which time we were already on the other side of the wall.

After we got out, Erin threw her arms around me and hugged me.

"What was that for?" I asked.

"I just realized I might never see you again," she said. "If, well, you know. Don't do anything stupid, okay, Typhon?"

"I'll try not to. Don't worry, Erin—"

"Just shut up and hug me back, will you?"

So I did.

* * *

I stood perhaps ten paces from the entrance, dressed in the simple robes of an initiate, yet the whisperings from the darkness where the Warders stood came as if from a great distance. I heard only snatches of their speech.

"...too young...you are sure?...will most certainly die."

"I say that he is ready," my father stated clearly.

The hooded figures conferred with one another. "...most unusual...even extenuating circumstances...not be permitted."

The ice in my father's voice was not to be denied. "You contest the will of a Duke of the High Rim?" he asked as he somehow grew larger, dimmer, and darker.

I could taste the raw fear of the four Warders as they shrank from him. "N-n-no, lord...fair warning...not...held responsible...proceed." They returned their *kif*-poles to a waiting position and backed away from the entrance.

"Typhon. You are as ready as anyone ever is. Go now." My father reached out to clasp me by the shoulder as I passed by.

I entered the Logrus.

That is an understatement, rather like saying "I let go of the bomb and then it exploded." I don't know what I was expecting, but it was certainly not what I found.

I stepped into a lush green forest, the sun shining brightly and warmly in the azure sky. I turned around. The entry point was nowhere in sight. A cool breeze blew, rustling the leaves of the trees, but there was no other noise except for a faint sobbing borne upon the wind.

I followed the sound to a tiny clearing where a young girl wearing a golden-threaded white dress stood crying. I knelt by her side, took her hand, and asked, "What's the matter, little girl?"

She looked at me with tear-filled eyes. "My cat. He climbed that tree and can't get back down."

The tree was huge — perhaps ten feet around and a hundred tall. Up near the top, I could see a tiny animal. "Okay. Don't cry, little girl. I'll get your cat for you." I gave her a confident smile as my limbs lengthened and my hands curved into climbing claws.

Five minutes later, I was perched carefully on a branch, reaching for the four-legged furry creature. Shaping my hand into a filamented scoop, I stretched out to pick it up. It hissed at me; I grabbed it. As I touched it, the world disintegrated: the sky rolled up with a sound like thunder and the tree collapsed upon itself. The cat's body slimmed, lengthened, and smoothed into a silver snake, with one red eye and one empty socket, that curled about my hand as I fell through the void.

I was buffeted by winds, tumbling through an empty grey shaft or an ancient well. On the walls of the well were faces of people I had known and faces that I had never seen before. They were muttering to themselves, or to one another, or to me; I couldn't tell. At the bottom of the well, there was a piercingly bright light. The snake twisted around to stare directly into my eyes. An instant later, it collapsed into a large vermilion ruby-like gemstone.

Then the flashes started. For no more than an instant, I found myself standing in a frozen barren wasteland, shivering as the icy wind tore my breath away. I changed automatically to accommodate my new environment, but the next moment I was falling once more. Then there was a hellish fiery landscape, the heat igniting my hair and searing me. I was falling again suddenly, then sealed deep inside the earth. Pierced by a million needles. Immersed under water. Floating through vacuum. Crushed within enormous teeth. Blasted with electricity. Smashed by sledgehammers. Ravaged by magical forces. Eaten by squirming maggots.

All throughout, the image of the snake with one red eye burned itself into my mind as I fell. I clutched the gem so hard that it cut my hand, my blood making it slippery and difficult to hold.

The flashes came more rapidly and more intensely. I was screaming now, I think. I can't say how long I fell, but the changes became intolerably fast, intolerably long, intolerably different. Everything jumbled together; each slice of existence and agony was the only reality I knew. That was when I hit the bottom of the well, slamming into solid rock.

I think I passed out, but when I came to my senses, I found that I was already moving, running through a maze of quicksilver passages. The gem was gone from my hand, but its familiar color appeared in occasional flickers of red light that appeared to drench the corridors in blood. My blood. The maze changed like a living creature as I passed through it: growing, shrinking, warping, turning. Pathways opened and shut like valves or appeared and disappeared like air bubbles in boiling water.

I was shifting also to fit through the wavering corridors, leaping over the sudden pits that formed before me, hardening my feet to walk over razors, twisting my body to avoid the switchblade spikes that snapped outwards without warning. As I continued, I realized that I was taking a path that led me deeper and deeper into the maze. The flashes of light increased in frequency until I was moving in the shadow of a rapidly pulsating strobe.

At last, I entered a huge circular chamber in the maze that was unchanging. In the exact center of the room, there was an ebony cylinder carved with spiral notches, around which was coiled the largest snake I have ever seen.

Next came a part I do not remember too well. Many creatures blocked my path to the altar: feral children, peculiar pepperpot-shaped robots, wild animals of all forms and sizes, mobile flesh-eating plants, huge always-changing masses of protoplasm, elemental powers. I think I killed them all.

Worse of all were the people: the people I thought I knew. I have dim, disjointed images of catching Erin by surprise and breaking her neck; of striking my father relentlessly with a staff of iron as he watched sadly, until the blood came from his mouth and ears; of stabbing a woman I had never seen before repeatedly with a crystal knife; of forcing my hand through the chest of a boy who looked and sounded exactly like me and crushing his still-beating heart into that red gemstone which I had previously held as he twitched and screamed and called my name...

I'm not sure I can recall exactly what happened. I'm not sure if I *want* to recall exactly what happened.

Eventually, I stood before the altar, staring at the snake that was the Serpent. It looked back at me with its single unblinking red eye and its empty socket. It studied me silently, its tongue tasting the air. Then it spoke, with a voice like a thousand people talking at once.

"Well done (child/son/scion) of (Chaos/Order/Chaer/Ordos), return it to (Us/Me/I) and (you/they/all) will be greatly (rewarded/revenged)."

The serpent lowered its head to my level and looked at me with its one remaining eye. I looked back. Inside the eye, I perceived a structure that was changing, twisting, always in motion. Then I was falling into its redness, a space of infinite dimensions.

On one level, I felt myself being torn apart, my consciousness somehow scattered through all of Reality, pushing relentlessly into, around, and through the barriers. I was the barriers, then I was through the barriers, then I was not, then I was again. I saw everything happening, everything that had happened, everything that would happen, all at once: my father waiting outside, studying I-don't-know-what with a concerned expression on his face or his faces; the Court sky changing through a full cycle of thirty-two shifts; a desperate half-man, half-machine fighting a hopeless battle for his life; angels falling from the ruthless sky looking arrogant and defiant but still somehow brave and anguished; a young woman weeping by a spinning wheel, waiting for the end of days; a shadow storm sweeping up buildings and people and scattering them across the past; a place where tiny ants scurried over pocket watches melting over engraved rocks; and much, much more.

I still see them in dreams sometimes.

Yet, on another level, though the reddish haze, I saw my body moving of its own accord to put the gem I held into the Serpent's empty socket. There was a distant *click*, then the stone was seated firmly and I was giving a cat to a young girl in a golden-threaded white dress who was no longer crying, but laughing and hugging me and the cat was purring, and then I was staggering out of a silver doorway, but not staggering, walking proudly, and my father clasped my shoulder and said my name, and his face was unchanged but I saw his eyes shining as if to say "This is my son, Typhon, with whom I am greatly pleased."

I had done it. I had walked the Logrus and lived.

I was thirteen.

* * *

Erin's fifteenth birthday was a week ago. We sat by the side of the fire fountain watching the redsky turning orange, my arm around her shoulders.

<You know, Erin, your father really does not approve of me.> Actually, I was fairly certain that Moloch detested me: he found the fact that his daughter hung out with me rather than pursuing her studies distasteful in the extreme.

{He doesn't approve of a lot of things.} She smiled. {So, when are you going to help me take the Logrus? You said you'd do it when you had it all figured out.}

I sighed. <I do, mostly, but—>

{But nothing, Typhon! I'm fifteen! I've been practicing every day since you took it — don't you think that's long enough? I've reviewed all the stuff you showed me, and thought about your trip over and over again. What else can there be?}

<My trip might not help. It changes every time, Erin, and it's different for everyone. There must be a reason why most people don't do it until they're twenty or so. Look, *I* think you're ready — you feel as ready as I think I felt when I took it, but...>

{Then why don't you help me take it?!}

<Okay.> I took a deep breath. <There's one more thing that I have to show you which I haven't shown you before. I... I don't like to think about it. You remember when I was killing all those creatures to get to the altar? There was more to it than that.>

I showed her: my hands already slick with blood; her face framed against the red light; my hands resting on her shoulders; moving in closer, perhaps to kiss her; she was laughing, her eyes shining brightly; then I took her by the neck and *snap*, she lay at my feet like a broken doll.

Erin gasped and pulled away from me. "You thought that was me, really me, and you, you..." She was shaking and looking at me with disbelief. "Why didn't you show me this before?"

"I didn't want to hurt you."

"Hurt me? You... you *killed* me! How could you?"

"There's more, Erin. I killed my father and myself, too. Let me show you." I reached out to try to contact her, to re-establish the link.

"Don't touch me!" she shrieked.

"Erin," I pleaded. "I know I thought it was you. But the Logrus can do things to you while you're walking it. I only knew at the time that I absolutely *had* to see the Serpent. And that I had to kill everything and everyone who got in my way. It scares me, too. A lot. You know me better than anyone else does, Erin. You know I really care about you. Please, Erin?"

She shivered, but reluctantly let me hold her. Then she burst into tears. I didn't say anything, just held her tightly and rocked her gently until the tears became sniffles. She wiped her eyes.

<All right?>

{I, I — oh, I don't know, anymore.}

<You still trust me?>

A pause, which hurt immensely. {Yeah.}

<Do you still want to take the Logrus?>

{Yes.} Determined, now.

<Even now that you know the sort of things it can show you and the sort of things it can make you do?>

{Yes, Typhon. I'd... put my life in your... your hands.}

<You sure? I'm worried that you might not be stable enough, that that's the reason why your father wants to make you wait.>

{Typhon! I'm sure!}

<Okay, then. I'll show you the whole thing again from beginning to end, nothing left out this time. Then we'll spend the rest of the turning going over everything I can think of that might be important. If it all checks out, we'll both get a good rest, then take the Logrus early yellowsky.>

We did just that. She was ready, as far as I could tell. She seemed to have completely recovered from my revelation earlier. Maybe I was wrong about her mental resilience.

At the start of the next turning, shortly after I woke, I pulled the Logrus up before me and watched the tendrils randomly twisting by themselves. I don't know what I was looking for. Inspiration, maybe? Guidance? I predicted about three-quarters of its moves correctly. Lucky, I guess. But I suppose that it was a good sign.

As the first dim fingers of yellow suffused the dull orange sky, I felt a vague feeling of presence: a Trump contact.

<Hello?>

She was standing in her room, brushing her hair. She stopped when I answered. {Are you up yet, Typhon?}

<Yes. Bring me through and I'll take us there.>

A moment later, I stood by her side. I could see her uneasiness. <Feeling nervous?>

{Uh huh.}

I kissed her. <That's okay. I did, too. Do you still want to go through with this?>

She nodded. {Yes, Typhon, I'm absolutely positive that I do.}

<Hang on, then. Here we go...> I reached for the antechamber of the Logrus; contact was instantaneous. In an eyeblink, we were standing before the four Warders. They immediately crossed their *kif*-poles before the entrance.

"That should not be possible!" the farthest one exclaimed. "This place is warded." Peculiar. And interesting, if true.

"Hold!" the nearest Warder ordered. "Who are you?"

"I am Typhon of Helgram and this is Erin of Dysher," I answered.

The next nearest Warder spoke. "Typhon may pass but Erin may not."

"Why?" I asked, though I knew the answer already.

"By the order of High Duke Moloch—" The Warder didn't complete his sentence because I slammed each of them against the walls, ceiling, and floor with a Logrus tendril and pinned them there.

I grasped Erin by the hand. <Your father's going to kill me. Last chance to get out of this, Erin.>

{Forget it! Let's go!}

The Warders' warnings and shouts were cut off abruptly, as if someone had flipped a switch, when we entered the doorway together...

There followed something like a series of one act/one prop plays, performed all at once under the watchful gaze of a Serpent high in the sky above.

Stalking her in a shady alleyway, it in my hand, following her nervous footsteps. Tied down on an altar, she held it in both hands high over my chest and chanted in ceremony. Standing in front of her protectively,

feinting with it at the unseen foe. Pinning her down in the mud, it glinting as she drew it from her boot. Whirling it in a circle, watching our reflections in the metal.

Trapped under a rock, she pushed down on it like a lever and I escaped. Brandishing it in her name, I bore it proudly as the symbol of my office. Huddled together for warmth in the cave, she poked it hesitantly into the dying fire. Leaning on it for support as we made our way up a steep and rocky mountainside. Skipping around and around the maypole, over, under, and through.

Scooping up a strange mixture from a bubbling cauldron as she mixed. She poured a crystal clear nectar of the gods out of it. Tasting bitter hemlock from it while she held my head so I could swallow. She wiped sweat away as she used it to catch the venom that would have dripped upon my open wound. Sitting in a circle of Typhons and Erins as we spun it to decide who kissed who.

She signed the legal papers that said she owed me rent. Getting up to claim the bill after a shared restaurant dinner. A tug at my money pouch as I caught her with her hand inside. Flipping one to the poorly-dressed beggar girl at the side of the road. Heads and tails alternating on the turning disk as it flew through the air.

Then we were waltzing slowly to the strains of badly played violins, in a ballroom full of wax statues. {Wha... did you get that, Typhon?}

<Erin?!>

{Who else?}

<You saw the same things?>

{You mean the —FLASH KnifeStickCupCoins FLASH—? From my point of view, yes. You think it was analyzing us?}

<That sounds reasonable. I didn't realize that mental contact within the Logrus was possible.>

{Evidently, it is.} She lifted her head from my shoulder. {Look out: there's a wax figure bearing down on us.}

It tapped me on the other shoulder and asked, "May I have the pleasure of this dance?" in a thin and reedy voice. I half-turned to see a mannequin with partially melted, unidentifiable features. As I watched, its face flowed again and set. I didn't recognize him, but Erin tensed. When I

glanced at her, she had turned pale. She made a slight movement with her head.

So, "No," I said.

There was a sound of thunder that was not entirely inside my mind, then a rumbling noise as the whole room shook. Slabs of marble detached themselves from the ceiling and crashed to the fragmenting floor. The wax statues broke apart and melted under a yellow light like an arc lamp which shone from between the widening cracks. Then, we too were breaking apart, breaking up, separated from each other and from ourselves. We fell apart into the light.

It seemed for a while that I was watching us through a kaleidoscope from a great distance overhead. I saw tiny pieces that used to be us passing through a heavy jasmine rain. I felt separate from what I saw; the pieces that were us were scattered randomly across my field of vision, but somehow displayed a sort of coordination. Then I was again in my body and pushing in slow-motion through a thousand thousand curtains into Shadow. All at once, different parts of me felt burned, frozen, prodded, tickled, punctured, inscribed, and abraded. Change exploded through my body, each part of it rippling through different configurations to adapt to its immediate environment as I moved.

We passed through into a beautifully luxurious garden. We wandered there a time until we came to the midst of the garden, where there stood a peach tree with but a single peach. A silver snake with one red eye was coiled around the largest branch, where it looked down upon us with something like wry amusement. Erin plucked the fruit from the tree and studied it. The Serpent bared its fangs and said to her, "This is the Fruit of the Tree of your Knowledge. Eat of it if you dare."

The peach screamed as Erin took a bite of it, the juices dribbling from her chin with the look of blood. She handed it to me and I took a bite also. The peach screamed again. It was tough and bloody like uncooked flesh; maybe that was what it was. I felt an inexplicable deepening of the link between Erin and me: at first, it seemed that if one of us should die, the other would also. Then it seemed that if one of us should die, the other would know. Finally, the link faded back to its usual intensity, like a lantern hooded and hidden away.

The Serpent hissed at me. "That is all you may have of the Fruit. The rest is hers, and hers alone. Your enlightenment is not hers and hers is not yours." Erin ate the rest of the peach calmly, almost mechanically, but I could sense the turmoil within her mind.

It became more apparent with each mouthful she took that the pit of the peach was a glowing red gem. When she finished, she handed it to me wordlessly. I examined it. It looked just like the one I had put in the Serpent's eye the last time I was in the Logrus.

I moved to do so again, but it was knocked out of my hand and we were chased away by an unicorn wielding a flaming horn. No, that's not right — maybe it was a winged man wielding a flaming sword. I don't know. I ran, with Erin hard on my heels. The garden fell apart around us, then the Logrus fell apart around us, and then I found myself outside.

The first thing that I felt upon completing the Logrus again was an exhilarating sense of accomplishment. The second was a hand that seized me by the neck and lifted me off my feet.

"You arrogant puppy! What have you done with my daughter?"

I tried to pry his fingers apart with my hands, failed, and settled instead for making choking noises and thrashing my legs.

"Let him go, Moloch." My father's voice.

"I think not, Tael. This boy of yours has too much to answer for."

The world dimmed somewhat, as though I had put on a pair of sunglasses, as I changed. Moloch jerked back as I literally slipped through his suddenly frostbitten fingers. I shifted back, stood, and coughed. "She was right behind me," I said, rubbing my neck and breathing deeply.

Right on cue, Erin stepped through the portal. She blinked and looked around dazedly.

Then she collapsed.

I was nearest to her; I caught her reflexively. <Erin?> Uh oh...

"Give me my daughter, whelp!"

I did so carefully, if a little hastily. "Lord High Duke, I would die before I would hurt her," I protested.

"You are correct about that, although I believe you may have the order a little confused," he growled as he lifted her in his arms. "But that is easily remedied. Or at least to arrange so it does not matter from your point of view."

"Moloch," my father said in a dangerously solemn voice.

He glared at him, then at me, and said through gritted teeth, "For so long as I live, Helgram-pup, you are forbidden to set foot in the Ways of Dysher. You may not see my daughter, nor may you speak to her, nor she to you. And, if she has been harmed in any way by this, I swear to you that you will regret it for the rest of your extremely short and miserable life."

Erin stirred. {Typhon, I—} Her father made a sign with his left hand and they disappeared in a gout of flame.

<Erin!>

I felt numb; I had taken my best friend into the Logrus, succeeded, and then lost her, all in the same turning. It wasn't even mid-cycle yet. "Father, I only wanted to help. I know she was ready. We made it, didn't we? And..."

He picked me up; perhaps the first time he had done so since I was a child. "I know," he said reassuringly. "Come on, Typhon, let's go home."

Typhon was a character in Philip Haar's 'Bloodlines' campaign in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Bernard Hsiung *is currently in the throes of attempting a Ph.D. in theoretical computer science at the University of Michigan. His two greatest concerns are deciding what he really wants to do when he grows up and finding someone to pay him to do it. Interests other than Amber (which he seldom has the time to indulge these days) include reading, writing, and sleeping. His favorite book is* The Last Unicorn, *by Peter S. Beagle. He can be reached via e-mail at bshsiung@eecs.umich.edu.*

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Family Gallery: Introduction

Joseph M. Saul

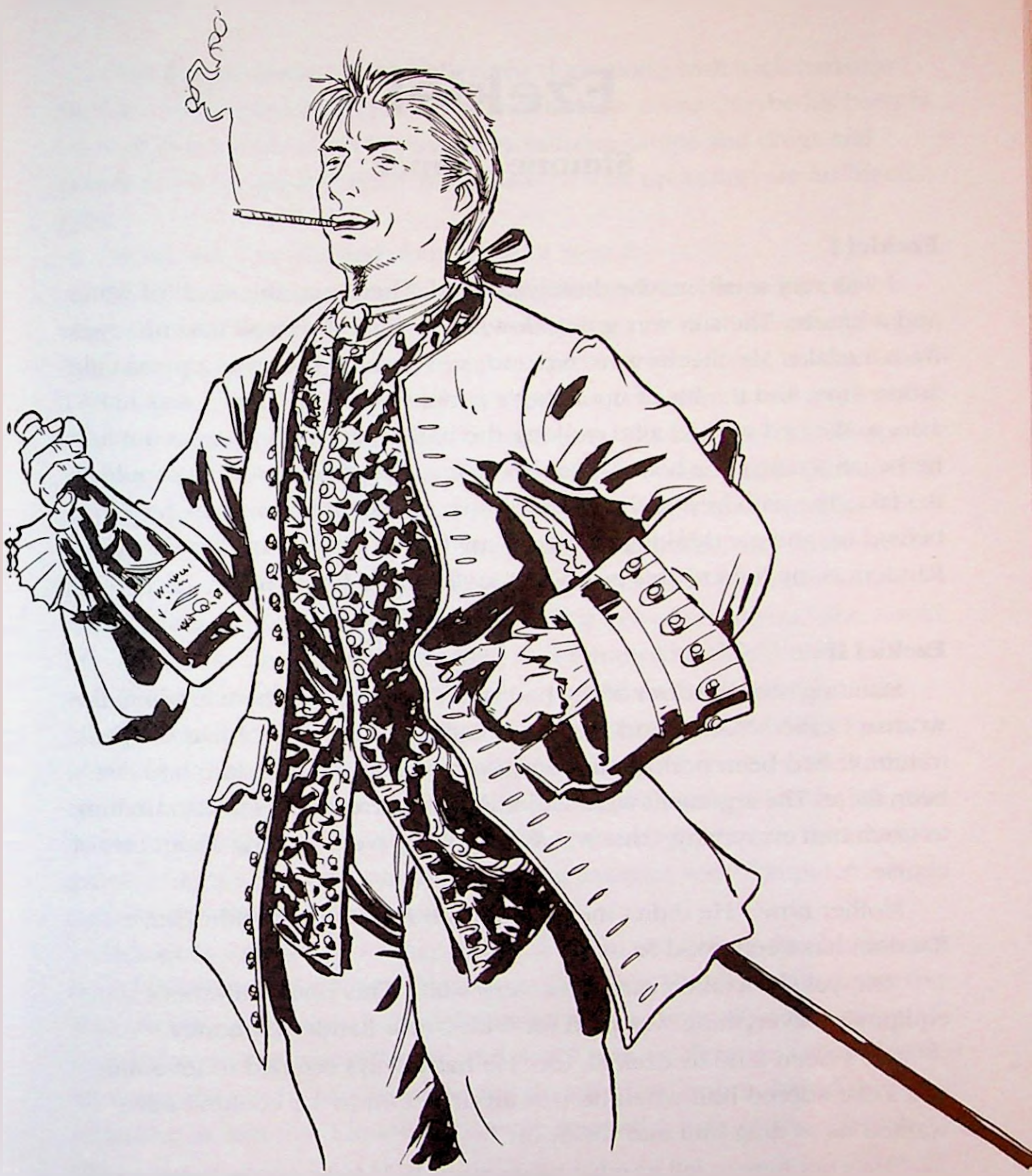
If you're like me, you first encountered Zelazny's Amber books long before you had ever heard of the role-playing game. Long before the game existed. If you read them way back then, you formed your own pictures of the characters. I did, anyway. When the *Visual Guide* came out, I read it and looked at the castle maps—but I avoided looking at the Trump drawings. I didn't want to destroy my own images of the Amberites in favor of the artist's.

Unfortunately, it's a lot harder to avoid looking at the illustrations in the rule book. What makes it worse is that Michael Kucharski's renditions of the characters are pretty damn good. It's hard to shake Kucharski's vision and remember Julian, Flora, Random, and the rest as I used to see them. For people who saw the rule book first, or soon after they read the novels, those images of the Amber royal family will be forever etched in their minds as "the truth."

This isn't a *totally* bad thing; as I said, Kucharski's work is excellent. But it's just one vision, and I think having only one vision (or two, in the rare cases where Ken Alves did an illustration of a character as well) is limiting.

That's why I got hold of four artists who are involved with Amber—Lee Brimmicombe-Wood, Mark Riley LeBay, Wendi Strang-Frost, and James Zimmerman—and asked them to do Trumps of the elder Amberites. I asked them to go back to the books, to read what Zelazny says about the characters and how he describes their Trumps. I asked them, if at all possible, to avoid looking at the already-published pictures. Originally, I was going to make sure all of the immediate family was covered, with no duplication. As you'll see, it didn't quite work out that way. That's okay. They're good.

The illustrations are scattered throughout the magazine, grouped by artist, starting with Lee Brimmicombe-Wood's rendition of a debauched Random on the opposite page. I hope you will enjoy seeing these artists' visions of Amber as much as I have.



Ezekiel

Simone Cooper

Ezekiel I

I was very small, maybe three years old. There was the smell of water and a breeze. The sun was going down, and light bounced into my eyes from the lake. My cheeks were red and cold, but my coat was zipped tight around me, and the fur of my father's parka tickled my face. I was half asleep. We had walked all day along the bank until my legs gave out and he began to carry me home. That bouncing view from over his shoulder, the lake, the path beside the lake, the low sun slanting in, trees receding behind us, and me thinking, "You are my father; you are my father. Uncle Random is my father;" this is the first joyful thing I remember.

Ezekiel II

Standing near the door of my bedroom, I could hear them arguing, the woman I called Mother and the man I called Father when I had to speak to him. It had been perhaps ten or eleven years since Random had last been there. The argument went like this: "We were instructed to train him, to teach him everything;" that was Father. They were arguing about me, of course.

Mother now: "He didn't mean about the Arena. He couldn't have. Random has been good to us."

"Oh, yes, he's taken care of us very well." This house, Mother's equipment, everything was paid for with Uncle Random's money.

"He's been kind to Ezekiel, too. He has always seemed to love him, and Zeke adored him when he was around. I know he couldn't have wanted us to drag him into the Sport."

"He's not here to tell us what he wants, is he? Marie, you're being naive. A man who loves his child doesn't leave it in a place like this. A man who loves his child doesn't pay other people to raise it, doesn't pretend to be its uncle. He knew who we were when he selected us to raise the boy. He knew what we were. Wherever it is he goes off to, and wherever it is he plans to take the boy when he sees fit, he must know he'll need to fight."

"But for pleasure? I can't believe he'd go along with such barbarity. Ezekiel wasn't bred here. He's not made for the Arena. Maybe his body is up to it, but his mind wasn't made by training camps and drugs and practice. Simon, please, some of the kids he'll be up against are his friends, now."

"What are you worried about, Marie? Stop it."

There was a pause. "I'm worried the Arena will change him. I'm worried he'll become a Razer or a Goreboy or one of those other things this place makes. God, Simon, he's not a product of the tank, he's our son!" The sound of a slap came clearly to me, cutting off Marie's sobbing breaths.

It continued so: He's not ours. He is ours. We must ask Random. Random's not here. Random loves him. Random wants to make him useful.

I looked down at my body. I was wearing a thin summer robe. The tendons on my bare feet tensed alternately as I rocked a bit from side to side on the hardwood floor. It was a long way to the floor; this amused me. It often amused Mother. "There could be two of me in you," she would say as I came down into the kitchen in the mornings. We'd drink coffee together before she went into the back part of the house and her labs.

I'd usually join her there after I was done with my tutor. Microbiology, embryology, genetics, radiotherapy, these were our shared code and our mutual language. Mother and I had little to talk about outside the lab. But in the lab! Almost all my memories of her, the clearest ones, tint her face green from the glow of a monitor, testing samples with computer simulations. Father understood none of it.

Random was gone, perhaps finally. I knew with surety that he was not dead; accidents did not befall someone like him. He was too intense, too real, though at the time I didn't know anything about what that meant. I only knew that he was different, and that it was a difference I shared. Still, he was gone, and a life based on the dream of his return, based on my revealing to him that I knew our secret, seemed a remote and childish thing.

I let the robe fall to the floor. Surprisingly, I looked full-grown to myself, the stranger's body my head was attached to was dense with muscle, broad in the shoulders and thighs, long and narrow in the hips. I turned and looked at myself in the mirror on the back of the door, trying to understand this new image of myself.

The face did not seem older; my lashes were long like a young boy's and my brow and cheeks were smooth. My overlong, dark hair hung in unkempt waves across my forehead and on my shoulders. But there was a new fullness about me. I felt the flicker of tension in my stomach as I heard their voices still rising and falling downstairs. The slaps never ended the arguments, but they did, temporarily, turn the volume down.

I leaned forward and rested my forehead against the cold glass for a moment, then abruptly I turned the knob on the door and walked out into the hall and down the stairs.

I confronted them where they were standing together in the doorway to the kitchen. Mother's face was red and swollen, and Father looked haggard. "You heard..." Her voice trembled. She was so much smaller than Simon. I realized they must have been whispering, striving to keep me from hearing. I wondered how much of everything I knew was made up of things that I shouldn't have known.

"I want to train for the Arena," I said, "for the Viceroys." That was the team Mother did all the engineering for. She sat suddenly on the stool by the counter. Father just stared at me. If he was shocked by my interruption or by my nakedness, he didn't show it. I paced up to him and looked down at the top of his head. He would not back down, of course. That was his way; never seem weak, but I knew he was much, much weaker than I was.

Easily I lifted him with my hands under his arms and my thumbs against his collar bones. I realized how large those hands were. He didn't resist me at all; he just kept staring directly at my face. Without trying, I heard what he was thinking. It was projected so loudly I thought he had spoken. *I knew that accepting this boy would be the death of us. I knew it when we took him. You wanted him so badly, Marie. Now here he is, fifteen. Death.* Shocked, disgusted that he was right, horrified at the feel of his heavy, trainer's torso vulnerable in my hands, I dropped him. He swayed but remained standing. His eyes dragged over me, saying they knew what I meant to do, damning me.

I coughed, shuffled my feet. I had to turn my gaze from him. "You'll train me, sir. Won't you? You're the best the Viceroys have." For all his age and brutality that was the plain truth.

"Tomorrow morning. Pack your bags. Be in the training bunker by five a.m. You're not my son any more, if that's what you want. You are a

Viceroy. And damn if my training and that body won't take you to the top." He slapped my shoulder hard; his thoughts intruded again. *You'll do it someday. You couldn't today, but just a bit more stomach to you and I'll be broken at your feet.*

I went back to bed and shook until the alarm went off at four. I took some leathers and a few books my tutor and I hadn't finished.

That was the end of my life with Mother and Father and the beginning of my life with the team.

Ezekiel III

This is not a paean to the glorious days of the Viceroys and the Pit.

I spent the first three months of my training learning to suppress my shape-shifting. The first cut I took in practice led to a transformation that surprised me as much as my opponent. Luckily the opponent had been Father, and he just stored the information away in his huge silence along with everything else he observed and changed my practice schedule so we could work alone for a while.

The four months after that, he tried to hammer me into the team. Seven, eight hours every day, I practiced the moves. Analyzed by video and computer, exercised by program, I perfected every stance and every defense. None of that perfection translated into performance with the team.

Most of the time the brutal schedule to which Father held me kept me from brooding about them, how they moved together with that choreographic subtlety, how well they fit. Here though, in the warm-ups before the day's events, it was obvious. Watching from the cage I could only envy them. It was a society that neither skill nor strength could get me into.

There was no way around it: I was dead weight in the team ring. Father reluctantly had to assign me to the individual events, the type of Arena work Mother most despised. It was soon apparent that it was also the type to which I was best suited. With my first wins there was talk that Father used his influence to make things easier for me, somehow less lethal. On the contrary, it seemed he was out to kill me. My fight schedule was topped up with last season's hot bods. He never gave me long to get used to any kind of weapon. He kept delaying my trip to Kinsmere to impress

my armor. Even the bookmakers agreed; they laid odds against me nearly every fight even though I kept winning them, so uneven did the match-ups seem.

Perhaps as the season progressed his hardness stoked the rumors even further; how could I have gone on against that kind of opposition without some deal having been made? At least my incredible recovery rate could be put down to my mother's intervention. She did the same for all the Viceroys.

It probably didn't help that I had scored no kills. While it was discouraged, it was accepted that occasional deaths would occur accidentally; that was the nature of putting teenage boys with sharp objects into a fighting pit together. Three times a week, plus the winners' round on Saturdays, I went out — I was among the top ten in the pools — six months of fights in which I made it my business to be sure I had no accidents, and still neither my caution nor my success helped me get into the team event ring. If this failure was some fault in Father's methods or mine we couldn't find it. Somehow the dance didn't go right when I was part of it, and as my work in the individuals was so spectacular, he threw himself into that aspect of my training with more and more zeal.

But the worst part of the life, what made it horror instead of just work, was the audience. Without them none of us would have been in the pits at all.

Once in those early years, only once, I might have had the guts to run out on it. It was after my first fight. The screams and cheers of the 60,000-strong crowd rebounded in the shell of the Arena. The sound was rhythmic and primitive; it made me flush, and the hairs on my back rose. Arms aloft, receiving the accolade as I had been taught, I realized that, loud as it was, the cheer would have been ten times more fervent if I had struck my opponent three fatal inches to the left. Equally, if I had died, the pitch of their excitement would have been as great.

It came down to this: there was no game in the Sport, and all of us players knew it. For all the showmanship and all the rules of the Arena Committee, the crowd just hoped for the taste of blood.

In our home Arena, another warm-up session ended. The Viceroys in their orange and black flowed out of the pit to await their calls. I swung my arms and jogged hard on the spot for a second. As I was ranked high

and would probably have to fight two rounds today, they would call me first. My mood was bitter and cold. I didn't like the serrated blade I'd been given; its potential as a non-lethal weapon was very limited.

I knew my opponent by name; Smiley, he was called, a kid who always joked and boasted in the pub after the show. I half liked him. He was a Goreboy, and he rode into the ring before me on a chromed motor bike. Smiley loved getting bloody and winning anyway. He'd be soaring on pain-killers, probably Zeroes. Looking at him swinging his razor bar over his head, whipping up the crowd, I decided how the fight would go.

I took my mark — the small starting circle opposite Smiley's side — and he went to his, spouting sand under his wheels. The crowd was holding a pre-disappointment hush. One un-armored Viceroy with a blade, even one with my record, versus a fully dressed out Goreboy on a bike with a steel razor bar seemed pretty much a foregone conclusion. I shook my head.

The starting gun sounded. I stood in my circle while Smiley revved towards me; he'd get extra points towards his standing if he took me down on my side of the pit. He held the razor bar horizontally, swept back on his right and tried to pass me on that side. I waited for him, switched sides by jumping the front of the bike, braced my legs and pole-axed him across the stomach with my bare left arm.

Smiley went somersaulting backwards over the fulcrum of my arm and landed flat on his back in the packed sand. The bike, unguided, settled on the other side of my circle to wait. The razor bar had flown off and imbedded itself in the ground somewhere behind me.

I put my foot on Smiley's throat. The crowd screamed; I had the right to continue — my blade against Smiley, now disarmed. I might even get him back onto his own side.

Instead, I raised my arms and signalled the end of the encounter. Four and one-half seconds had passed since the gun. There was a hush. I left the Arena before the boos began.

Working my way back inside I had to push through the afternoon's fighters. As usual, they were waiting for their calls and staring up at video monitors which showed the Arena from multiple angles. "Shit! That's thirty seconds under the fastest time," and "That boy's Trainer is gonna go

berserk," and "The crowd got ugly over that one." The boys addressed themselves to each other and the air, indifferent to my passing.

I turned off into the cool-down area without switching on the lights. I hadn't noticed how hot it had been out in the Arena and in the holding corridor, but the relative coolness of this room, with no windows to the sun and no press of bodies, was a sudden relief. I was the first one back, of course, and as the door closed behind me and shut out the hubbub of the boys and the distant crowd noises I leaned against it, closed my eyes, and breathed in the blessed silence.

Abruptly the door was pulled open again—I turned and had to straighten quickly to keep from losing my balance. The overhead halogens stabbed on. Blinking, I saw Hitch, our team leader, standing in the doorway. He looked up at me, just looked. There was an astonishing and deep anger in him that I could see in his controlled stiffness.

A minute of silence passed between us. Finally Hitch stepped into the room and let the door swing shut behind him. Still without speaking, he turned and keyed the door with his password to lock it. "What are you doing, Ezekiel?" he said quietly, not looking at me.

I felt stupid, suddenly. "Huh?"

"In the Arena. What the fuck are you doing?"

I didn't want to be talking about this. "I'm winning, I think."

Hitch faced me at last and gazed at me in frank amazement. "You think this is about *winning?*" He spat out 'winning' like a curse. "You've been training with us the best part of a year and you haven't learned the first thing about us. What a Razer knows in his creche, what the first Arena Broadcast taught me, is don't win; entertain."

"I don't want..."

"Fuck what you want. Fuck what I want. That's what we must do." He was incredibly angry. There were tears standing in his eyes, and the ropes of tendon in his forearms bunched and jumped. His voice grated out in a whisper. "You can't just win. You can't just survive. Why do you think Goreboys are the crowd's favorites? 'Cause they get hurt, all the time, every time."

"Not today," I interrupted.

I didn't expect him to hit me. The base of his open palm connected with the left side of my jaw, driven like a piston by the whole of his

strength. It rocked my head sideways, and blood flew out of my mouth with two of my teeth. "God damn it, Hitch!" I sputtered out.

He was already dancing. The spin of his kick was too fast to do anything about and was hypnotically inevitable. I took the blow on the other side of my head. It knocked me to my knees. "Okay! Leave off!" I tried to grab his near leg, but it wasn't there when I reached it. I realized too late that I'd stretched almost full length. His paired fists hammered into the back of my neck, driving me downwards.

I flipped over and brought my knees up to kick him away from me. It was bound to hurt him, but I thought I could pull it a bit.

He didn't give me the chance; he wasn't where I was sure he'd be. The kick missed him by six inches, and he drove the toe of his boot into my exposed side.

This time I was able to roll away and get to my feet. I knew it would cost me taking another hit, but if I could get up and grapple him, this stupid fight would be over. I took my stance. Surprisingly, Hitch didn't take the free shot.

I looked at him. Blood ran freely from my mouth and right ear. Hitch looked fresh and ready. I evaluated. He was smaller than I was, five foot ten or eleven and around 180 pounds. In practice, in those torturous team sessions, he'd never seemed particularly better than I was, though he was obviously better than the other team fighters. I realized how much he must hold back, working with them. He wasn't going to let me grab him, because he already knew that was the way I could beat him.

I put my hands on my knees, letting the blood flow, and tilted my head. Hitch decided I wasn't going to go for him and went to the back of the room where the medical kits were. He got out some stuff to clean me up with and some blood-clotting powder and a bottle of Dimes for my bruised muscles. "Sit down," he ordered.

I did as he asked. He tended my ear and made me take off the top half of my suit to sew up my side, which I hadn't noticed had opened up a bit, and I downed two of the Dimes with a glass of ice water which stung my lip and torn gum. While he worked, he talked. "That's a message from the Trainer. He blames himself partly, too, I'll tell you. He was so impressed with your win record that he left out some of your 'necessary education.' But he won't have you do that again. Viceroys won't get saddled with a

bad image. If people don't want to watch us, the Committee'll give other teams the okay to liven things up.

"I know how you did against me," he continued, "How would you do against me with, say, a poison blade? 'Cause there are a few out there as good as me. Not many, maybe two or three, and most of them are on the team circuit, so you'll never meet 'em. But if you do, and they've got some reason to be out for you — I mean some real reason and not just the Sport — you won't make it." With that he stood straight and looked down at me. "I'm finished." He pushed his straight blond hair off of his forehead and backed toward the door. Suddenly he seemed young to me and unsure; he was young, I suppose, seventeen.

"Do well," I said.

"Do well, Zeke." He unkeyed the door and left.

None of the boys who came in that afternoon asked me about my wounds. I spent the time before my next call intently watching the video. The Viceroys won the team event by a narrow margin. In their orange body suits and black patch armors I couldn't even pick Hitch out.

I'd healed completely by the time I got my second call. I strode out with my blade to a chorus of hissing disapproval. The day's other big winner was a foreign kid from another Arena who had bested his home team opponent in a straight sword-to-sword encounter. He had the blade now, a scintillating, blue-tinted sabre that looked sharp enough to cut through any parry. Like me, he didn't have his armor yet, so it was my brash orange against his royal blue.

On the gun we came out of our starting marks and met in the middle. For a thirty-second flurry we tested feints and counters and lunging distances. I judged myself equal to the kid, perhaps a hair better, and started pressing him towards his side.

The audience was not pleased with my apparent second victory; they were on their feet, booing, and the front rank was rattling the chain-link safety fencing rhythmically.

I fell back a bit, brought my guard in to expose the outer half inch of my sword arm. The kid was good enough to see it and lunge in. I hoped the sabre wasn't as sharp as it looked. As it was, it sliced cleanly through six inches of suit and a couple inches of me before I retreated out of his range. It hurt like hell. The crowd went nuts.

We were over the middle again, circling. He seemed surprised to have cut me; I suppose he'd come to the same conclusions I had about our abilities. Pretending to over-compensate, I left my inside open for a second, more than long enough to take another of his cuts on my ribs.

The minute bell rang. I parried a feint hard with the flat of my blade and tested the strength of his arm. That would certainly be my way in, when I took it. My confidence was a buzz that made me generous. I let him have a small touch on my forward leg as I lunged towards him, then another on my forearm as I retreated from his furious response.

When we took our guards again, he locked eyes with me, something even I knew I should never do. Look but don't see, every fighter knew that. His eyes were questioning. He knew I was just playing with him; how much more would I give him before I wrapped up the fight? I stepped back and re-established my guard. He took up the distance, and I re-took it. I pressed, attacked, not hitting, just forcing him to retreat a bit. My advance picked up speed until he realized he'd have to plant his feet and fight or actually turn tail.

He stopped, his boots digging into the sand. I kept coming, went easily under and inside his guard, my blade point up, and engaged him *corps a corps*. My forward leg bound his, and I brought my rear hand around his waist and hugged him to me hard; his sword arm waved behind me over my shoulder, useless.

I squeezed until I heard his lower ribs give and he started to collapse; then I used my sword arm to push him away from me while I took up my guard again and waited.

He heaved in breath, watching me warily. I advanced, and he had to bring his blade up in a clumsy parry, which I evaded. Underneath it was nothing but clear blue target. I lunged. My serrated blade took out a huge chunk of meat from his underarm. A jet of vivid, arterial blood sprayed from the wound, and he went down on one knee trying to hold it in with his good arm. His sword arm hung limp. I pushed him over backwards with my foot. He curled up on the sand. "Yours," he mouthed.

I waited a moment. The crowd was clearly with me now; I could even hear my name in the massive roar. The angel-wing of blood kept spreading out from the boy below me.

I raised my arms. Kept them up, sword in one hand, turning in the circle of the pit. The shout went up and went on a long time. When I finally walked out, the med team figured they wouldn't need to run.

The next two years passed over me. They are now a series of lunges, brief moments of clarity as my force carried through and my opponents' failed resistance shocked my arm.

In memory the sound is claustrophobic, my own breath whistling over lips drawn tight, everything else distanced by the sweat in my ears and the heat of my blood. Around me is a constant susurration; I know it was the crowd, hoarse from hours of screaming, but in dreams it is an ocean and my advancing feet are mired in its soft sand floor. I face into the tide; the water is a tremendous, streaming passage of time, salty and dark, bearing things past.

Sometimes now I am able to lift my feet away from the sea bed and float up. Turning round I can see myself made grey by the watery light, and the ends of my hair—black as it was then—drift around my face. There is an angel there with me, colorless and dead-eyed, beautiful. Her name is Gabrielle.

I wake up screaming.

Ezekiel IV

It was near the end of those two years that Random came back into my life.

I remember coming into my dressing room and locking the door behind me as I'd done hundreds of times. There was a full-length mirror hung on the back of the door. Usually I'd strip first and evaluate the day's damage. Then, watching in the glass with that voyeuristic fascination to which I still fall prey, I would heal the wounds away. They were usually quite shallow; by then my daily preparation for the pit involved growing a tough, membranous armor under my skin. It was cheating, technically. The Arena Committee said all armor and weapons must be declared. They also said we were participating in an ancient and noble tradition for the glory of all Tagiere Province.

That day I'd faced my first team opponents, the Greenlee Cavaliers. It was supposed to be a big deal, different from any fight before, but in truth it wasn't. It did mean I'd been well skewered through the right thigh by a

guy with a punch dagger while I fended off the other two. I'd have to work a large metal shard to the surface of the wound before I could start knitting things together.

All these things, everyday, habitual, were in my mind when I saw the bottle against the far wall.

It was clearly a champagne bottle wrapped with foiled paper covered with harlequin diamonds, red, orange, and brown, outrageously gaudy; red curling ribbon spilled from the folds of paper like foam. "Random," I breathed.

"I hear you're a star." His voice came from the corner to my right.

My chest froze. A slow, thick trickle of blood itched its way down my leg inside my suit. I heard him rise from my chair. I thought I'd still be standing there, staring at that bottle, hours later.

I turned towards him carefully, found my eyes aimed over his head. Uncomfortable, I adjusted my gaze down to his face. His features fit into my memory like a key into the tumblers of a lock.

He appraised me. "Shit, you're huge."

I blinked.

"Hey, don't you recognize me? It's Random, remember? Uncle Random? C'mon kid, didn't your father give you my message? He said you were looking forward to seeing me." He seemed so slight, inconsequential; there were lines around his mouth from smiling, but at the moment he looked exhausted.

I swallowed hard. "Random."

"Yeah, you remember?" There was an edge to his voice and to the used-up look around his eyes. There was something of desperation there. "It's been a long time, Zeke. I've missed you." He stepped towards me, arms open like he was going to hug me.

"Wait," I said, panicking, holding up one hand to him. I needed time. "I need to sit down." He looked me over. My Viceroy orange did a lot to hide the extent of my injuries; it didn't show cuts, being quite elastic, but the hole in my leg was pretty obvious and dark with blood now. I gestured at it.

"Yeah," he said hoarsely, "yeah, okay." He turned back to the corner and returned with the chair. I sat heavily and started peeling back the torn edges of the suit. I didn't want to strip in front of him; I was conscious of

perhaps two dozen lesser cuts and grazes on my torso. Also, I wanted to think, to come out of the strange, hypnotized daze I was in.

"Get me some scissors, will you?"

He was staring at the revealed wound. "Jeez, yeah." He looked around, and I pointed under the sink by the door.

When he came back with them, I cut away the sodden cloth. Beneath it the edges of the wound were ragged, and the pale fibres of my armoring membrane were stretched and frayed. The blood was thick and black, trying to clot. I'd taken the hit early on out there, and the healing process was well begun. It couldn't be helped.

I leaned my head back and concentrated on feeling out the contours of the metal slivers still deep in the muscle. I must have glazed over a bit, because Random half-stepped forward. I motioned him back and wrapped a bit of muscle around the largest piece, wondering distantly if the kid had been given such a shoddy weapon in the hopes of putting me out of the Arena for good with the splinters; they were big enough to do irreparable damage to a norm, working around in the muscle like that. The kid himself was dead now.

A sheen of sweat spread over my face and down my back as I started nudging the metal to the surface. The aggravated wound suddenly welled up and started pouring new blood which spattered the tiles. I went through and re-routed a few vessels to calm it down. A moment later a wet metallic clank marked the biggest piece of the dagger hitting the floor.

My effort was working brilliantly. I wasn't thinking about Random at all.

He stood nearby in silence while perhaps ten minutes passed. I finished it and slumped; the wound was clean and drawing together. I let the sinewy sheathing pull back into my joints as I finally relaxed. I was ready for him.

"Sorry about that," I said, out of breath. I shook my head to clear it.

"No problem, no problem."

My stomach clenched; he seemed oblivious. "I mean, it's been what, thirteen years? I didn't forget you, I just forgot *about* you, about ever seeing you again. I had this life to get on with." I shrugged in my chair, looking around the grey, workmanlike room.

He opened his mouth, shut it again, worked his jaw. Finally, he said, "I've been busy. That sounds weak, and I'm sorry. Never mind." His eyes darted around the room. "Hey, you wanna get out of here? I know a bar in Greenlee..."

"I'm not welcome in Greenlee," I said flatly.

"Ah."

It was a stalemate. I would have to relent or send him away. "Give me a minute to change. We can go out before curfew." I caught his eye and forced a slight smile, but just a slight one. My face was not fully under my control; I didn't trust it.

I pulled the top of my suit over my head, wincing where the cloth pulled away from some drying cuts. I filled the basin with warm water and used a wet towel to scrub my back and chest down. A strip of skin was hanging from my left biceps which I self-consciously pressed back into place. Behind me, Random lifted the champagne bottle, put it down, rustled around in some of the supplies on my dressing table. He was humming something threadily under his breath, not looking at me.

I ran new water and doused my head and washed the sand out of my hair. Lastly I peeled down my ruined trousers and sponged the sweat and blood away. I pulled my hair back into a tail and dressed in the clothes from my locker, black leather with a crisp, loose, white cotton shirt as was my wont then. Then I grabbed my jacket off the hook beside the door.

"We go," I announced, spreading my arms and turning. "Good as new." When I faced him again, he looked less wary. We high-fived, which turned into a long handshake. "After you, Dad," I said quietly, unlocking and opening the door.

Random's eyes widened a moment, then his tired smile became a grin. "I've learned a lot about you today." And he went out ahead of me, brown soft suede pants, high boots, a red silk vest, fine hair.

"You're gonna get the shit beaten out of you, looking like that," I observed.

"We'll go someplace they know me!" he called back, then stopped suddenly. "This place is a fucking maze. How do we get out of here?"

I led him up the corridors towards the exit.

We came out into the grey glare of afternoon. The crowds had left, and the vast parking lot that surrounded the Arena was nearly empty. "There's

someone I'd like you to meet," I said, resisting as Random tried to steer me towards his outrageously expensive hired hovercar.

"A girl? Has she got friends?"

"Sort of, and no."

We walked around the side of the building where the armors that weren't being used stayed. Strike was among them, waiting for me. She was a motorbike, like most of the rest, though larger. The orange and black tigering she preferred rippled across her as she noticed me.

Zeke! Danger! Dangerdangerdanger! I heard her voice in my head, shrieking alarm. She rolled towards me.

I pushed Random down, dropped and spun. There was nothing there, just the three of us and the other armors, none of which were moving. Strike wheeled right around me and began morphing madly. Clearly she was interposing herself between Random and me. *Danger! Danger!* she was still clamoring.

Where? I thought, bewildered.

Right here! I felt the whine of building energy. Before I could stop her, Strike sent out a spear-like tentacle of mercury which stabbed at Random like a striking snake; he rolled away from it with eye-baffling speed.

Stop! I screamed to her mentally.

At the same time Random shouted, "Call it off!"

I sent the force of my mind out and gripped Strike tightly. Very slowly, like a cat held by the scruff of its neck, she relaxed. "It's cool," I murmured, "Be cool."

"She's never done that before," I said to Random as he got up and brushed himself off. He was looking warily from the lump of metalloid around my feet to the shattered bit of pavement where she'd hit.

"Wow. That could have been my head," he said admiringly. Then, frowning down at a tear in the elbow of his shirt, "I've never seen one of those things work independently like that. Marie been fiddling with it?"

I carefully stepped out of Strike's encirclement and loosened my mental grip on her enough to warn her I was letting go and to behave. "Actually, I'm not sure why she can do it. I think it has something to do with the mental bonding."

"Let's move while we talk," Random suggested, reaching up to grasp my shoulder. Strike rustled, but looking down quickly I saw she was just

pulling herself back into motorcycle form. Random started leading me towards the parking lot. "So, Simon let you get your armor. That's good, then."

I paused, "Where are we going? I should let Strike know."

"What, the Arena's made an old woman of you? Listen, I know a place, like I said. We can talk there, catch up. Plus, they've got an excellent in-house jazz band. Trust me. You'll love it. It's a bit of a drive, though."

"I've got a morning call tomorrow."

"I took care of it."

Shrugging helplessly, I went with him to the hovercar. Inside it was air-conditioned and smog-free. As Random started the engine, heavy Industrial music pounded out of hidden speakers, which he sheepishly turned down. "They're local. Catching the color. You know."

"I know."

Random slammed the gear lever and the elevation at the same time, and we rose over a cloud of sand and gravel kicked up by the thrusters. "I do love this car," he grinned, and we rode off. If there was a traffic law left unbroken by the time we hit the 'burbs, it was an obscure one. He knew and dodged all the monitors, though, and in five minutes we were away over the south of Tagiere, the farm domes dotted beneath us like green boils on the grey, sterile skin of the countryside.

We didn't speak. Finally, while reaching for the stereo controls to make some imperceptible adjustment, he cleared his throat and said, "So, tell me about it, about... 'Strike' did you call her?"

"Um. Well. Like I said, I don't know why she's still so active. I impressed her over a month ago." Random's upraised eyebrows gave at least an illusion of interest, so I went on. It was better than the silence. "There didn't seem to be anything unusual about her when I was admitted to Kinsmere to pick her out. You've been there?"

He nodded, "A while back."

"There were maybe three or four spheres and couple of partly spawned ones out in the sand on my trip. I just went up to one of the fully developed ones. It all went like I'd been told it would: I concentrated on the finished form and movement I wanted, a low, heavy bike, nothing too original. I put my palms on her surface and the shift was going as normal, but about an hour into it, she sort of... 'woke up' would be the best way

to describe it. Maybe a lot more of them are conscious somehow; it's not like I can ask anyone about it. If the Committee thought there was anything weird about her, something else that might give me an unfair advantage..."

We lurched as Random banked the car to line us up with the markers running along the Tagiere/Amilyn Route across the Western Sea. We shot past the coastline doing upwards of 200 mph; the sluggish grey water burbled beneath us in a blur. Suddenly sunlight started filtering in through the covering smog. The sea ahead of us moved more, and the oily foam that flecked it began to thin. Gradually it developed a more watery, less curdled quality; in a few minutes it was dancing and sparkling under a westerly breeze, racing towards us in clean rows of waves.

"Where are we?" I'd made the trans-oceanic flight from Tagiere south and west to Greenlee and Souvan dozens of times, travelling the Arenas. The sun didn't shine this time of year, period. The water was an even film of lifeless sludge from one coast to the other. Above us the spaced line of route signals was notably absent.

Random put the car into cruise and shifted in his seat towards me. "There's a lot of stuff I've got to tell you about, Zeke. More than I can say tonight. A lot more, since you know about me ... us." He paused, studied his hands which were, like the rest of him, slight but well muscled. "How did you know? About me being your father, I mean."

I decided to tell him part of the truth for now. "I've overheard Marie and Simon discussing it many times. They argued about what to do with me since you had been incommunicado so long."

He looked genuinely puzzled. "But I spoke to Simon often; two, three times a year. He said he'd get you on the Viceroys. He told me about your progress with them and about your shape-shifting. He administered all the monetary payments and arrangements for Marie's equipment. Didn't he tell you any of that?"

My face felt hot. Carefully, controlled, "I knew it was your money. I guess I thought you'd left it in a lump sum, or something. I thought you were gone." Many times I'd thought, *if only Random knew what was happening to me, he'd make it stop.*

"Simon must have wanted to keep from hurting Marie. She looked upset this morning when I arrived at the house. She so wants you to be

hers, you know; she loves you." He chuckled fondly as though her loving me was the endearing but foolish trait of a simpleton.

I nodded woodenly. The sparkling sea was changing direction beneath us, following us now. Ahead it rose into breakers. We were coming to land again, easily an hour ahead of where our first landfall ought to have been.

The beach was flat, tan sand which stretched to a line of fern-like trees. Some small wooden buildings were perhaps a mile south of us, if my direction sense was still true. There were torches stuck into the sand around them. The sky had gone completely clear and was pink and yellow with an early sunset.

Random faced forward again and slammed the car into a sudden deceleration which churned the water. He banked in expertly over the clear strip of beach and headed for the buildings. "You've done well, Zeke. Your record, your academic work..."

"That was before the Arena."

"Well, of course, but even then." He nodded to himself. I sensed he was proud, but whether he was proud of me or of something he perceived he had done for me, I couldn't tell. I had a sudden urge to grab him, riffle through his brain like a pack of cards, read them and scatter them to the winds. I gripped my seat instead as he took the car through another round of decel.

We stopped. "This is the place." He motioned through the windshield. The buildings were a series of open bars and kitchens. About two dozen people in loose, pale garments were dining and drinking at small round tables in the sand. Near the water line, a quartet of musicians was working its way energetically through some lively number involving a lot of violin, but it was muffled by the soundproofing of the hovercar.

"Where's here?" I wondered out loud.

"Bermuda. Well, Bermuda minus the poor people. And the bugs. And the tourist shops. Not Bermuda at all, really, except that's how it started out." He was watching the gyrations of the band with avid attention. "Let's go. Let's get a table." And he was out of the car, moving across the sand. I noticed his feet were bare like everyone else's, though I hadn't seen him take his boots off.

I removed my shoes as well and stepped out of the car. The breeze smelled like salt and wet greenery, not a smell I'd ever experienced before.

The sand was warm and fine. Leaving my jacket on the seat, I followed Random into the circle of torches where he was being glad-handed by a pair of chefs with identical deep tans. He motioned at me and grinned, and the two men made surprised and then smiling faces and nodded.

He left them and ran back across the circle to me like a puppy. "C'mon, nephew." He nudged my ribs at which I grimaced. "Oh, oops. Sorry. Let's not keep our dates waiting."

Our dates were two huge lobsters boiled bright red and surrounded with grilled fruits and starchy vegetables I didn't recognize. We sat at one of the white wrought-iron tables and drank a lot of a very pale yellow wine and listened to the band, which was excellent, and the breeze carried off the last of the heat of what must have been a very hot day, and the sun took ages to get below the horizon, and I was on the verge of screaming through the whole thing.

Finally a moment came when Random's mouth wasn't either whispering to some passing woman, laughing, chewing, or drinking; and while it did have an awesome cigar in it, I figured this was the best chance I'd get. "Random, where have you been? Please? How did we get here? Why can I shape-shift and read minds and heal myself? Why can't you admit you're my..." His hand shot across the table and grabbed my jaw. His expression changed from one of bemusement to one of tense seriousness.

"Not even here," he said around his cigar, looking into my eyes. He pushed a thought at me; except for Strike, no one had ever sent to me purposely before. *You're my son. That's the worst thing in the many worlds you could be right now. Trust me.* He released me, eased again. Through the exchange his foot had not lost time with the music, tapping in the sand.

"Sorry. Uncle." I don't think I'd ever felt quite that *frisson* of fear before.

"As to your other questions," he went on casually, "they're most easily explained by the same fact, plus your mother's influence." He looked towards the sea and smiled at something remembered fondly. "And where we are?" He turned his gaze back upon me. "We're here. Right here, together in Sort-of Bermuda, in my dream of it, anyway. The place I discovered to rest in when I had more business in Arena than I have time for now."

"You mean all of it. By 'Arena' you mean Tagiere, Greenlee, the whole planet." I gestured behind me, over the water. His face gave away nothing. "But if this place isn't there, how did we get to it? By saying it's your dream of Bermuda, do you mean it's a trick of your mind?" I wondered immediately if I could do the same trick, whatever it was. I wondered if this trick meant escape.

Random sat back, hesitating. Then: "It's not a trick, exactly. It's just something I know how to do: travel from place to place. 'Shadow to Shadow,' we call it."

"We?"

"Me and the relatives. Family. You, eventually, probably. But not until you're ready." He turned and raised his arm, flagging down one of the lithe, dark waitresses. "Put this on my tab, please." He stood and stretched, slapping his stomach. To me he said, "Well, we've got to get you back. Big fights tomorrow, eh?" His perfect, jovial boy's face was all innocence.

It occurred to me as we walked away, Random hugging the chefs, the waitresses, and nearly half the clientele, that I should object somehow. I should disappear into the trees, swim out to sea, just convince him to drop me off by a small farm allotment with no TV, anything other than follow him dully like a dog. Like a dog, I would wait for him to return. Like a dog, I would not exist anywhere except in the moment, my two conditions: with Random, and away from Arena; without him, and in it.

He made no attempt at further conversation on the way back, and 'back' it was, the strange changes in the sea and air unraveling to gritty reality. I did not speak, or ask any questions. He wouldn't have answered, anyway. 'Not until you're ready,' he'd have said.

Back at the Arena, I was not too surprised to find it was still evening. In the silence of the hovercar, I pulled my shoes on and then my jacket, too; on the few vehicles left in the lot I could see the night's frost beginning to form.

I lifted my door and stepped out onto the tarmac. The car's interior fans went into overdrive to keep the cold air out. Finally, Random leaned across the passenger seat and put his hand onto mine where it rested on the door frame. "Be careful, Zeke." I started to wave him off, but he shook his head as though I'd misunderstood him. "I mean, be careful of the people here,

anyone new. Be careful of anybody asking about me. Be careful of anybody learning you're different. It's important."

I believed him.

He backed the car away from me far enough to elevate it, the wing door swinging quietly closed as the vehicle shrank into the distance.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets and inhaled the odors of oil and tar. Zeke. I looked around. Strike was rolling out from behind the back of the holding area, across the lot. She came up to me, threading between the parking markers and fee barriers. *You've been gone.*

Yeah. Let's see if I can sneak you inside before the curfew monitor comes out. We started walking.

Can I go into the Arena with you tomorrow?

I looked down at her. The bike she imitated was hefty and muscular; her thick wheels gripped the ground with smooth assurance. *Maybe you're ready,* I thought to her, *but Father won't like it.*

Doesn't that make it better?

I laughed, surprised. *It does at that, Strike. It surely does.*

Ezekiel V

For the rest of that season, Strike and I worked on our double act in the pits. It was hairy at first; we hadn't learned to predict each other. We lost two of our first four fights, and with Hitch breaking in some new team recruits and his resulting losses in that event, the Viceroys only ranked second that year.

Still, in another year we were back on top. In my five seasons, we'd been individual, team, and overall points leaders for three of them. Father, Head Trainer, had earned his place as guest of honor for the all-league, end-of-season banquet. By this time his face looked older than his fifty-three years, but his body hadn't let him down. In his black-tie suit he looked like a very tough bouncer.

Mother had refused to attend the banquet for the first time since their marriage, and Father spent the trip over looking daggers at me, thinking I must have turned her against him. He'd be embarrassed by her absence. I only returned his looks enigmatically. I'd had nothing to do with her sudden display of independence, but if it took heat off her, I'd let Father think I'd had.

Packed into the chartered jet, the rest of the Viceroys were quiet. Hitch was with his team, and they were specifically not with me. We could barely maintain the united front in public; in private it had broken down completely. They blamed me for the increasing injury rate in the Arena, which is to say they blamed me for their success. Hitch worked well under fire, and he responded quickly when it became clear to the other teams they'd have to get through us again in the finals.

Strike was in the cargo hold with the other armors. She'd begun some project to try to get more of the armors talking. It wasn't going well. I had felt her pain and frustration over this, but she persevered. It gave her something to do when we couldn't finagle some way for her to stay with me.

Our landing was so smooth as to be almost unnoticeable, but I was tense. Like every year, I guess, I hoped to find someone there who had seen something else, who could imagine a different life. The past couple of times, after enough liquor had gone around, I had at least found the little knot of dreamers and complainers who could admit the Arenas stank. They weren't much comfort; they still knew nothing.

It'd be the same this year, I told myself angrily, a lot of kids with scars desperately admiring old men with scars, the Trainers, guys who survived long enough and knew enough. Outside the ground crew opened the cargo doors so the armors could precede us down the red carpet, and the noise of it set my teeth keening.

When the armors were arrayed and waiting Father walked on ahead of us, sometimes shielding his eyes against the popping of the press photographers' flashes, concentrating on walking straight without getting baited into answering the tabloid writers' outrageous questions. Strike and I followed him, eyes front, same routine. After us came the other individual events guys and then Hitch and his team.

In the glare of the floodlights I couldn't see anything past the first row of reporters lined up along the carpet in a crush, but I could hear the cheers of a crowd from either side, off behind the ropes around the staging area. The noise cranked up a notch when the team emerged and came down in formation with their bikes and weapons. I was a stage villain compared to them. Popular, a draw like the tabloids had never seen, but a bad boy none the less.

Flunkies in the quilted uniforms of the Arena Committee were holding the doors to the banquet dome open for us. Warm, pressurized air rushed out to greet us; the light inside was the yellow-pink of artificial sun, and after a pause during which the armors broke ranks to park on the right, we were turned through a curtain into the main hall.

Something's wrong, Zeke. It's vague, though. Someone out of place. It was Strike's voice. I had to filter it through the distracting glitter of the dome's monstrous chandelier, reflected exactly in candles on the tables and bounced by cut crystal and the gems of formal uniforms and jewelry. I was aware of a voice on the P.A. system announcing us by name. While I could sense that Strike's concern was genuine, I only found her news oddly exciting.

Is it something specific to us? Or to me or the team? I concentrated on focussing my hearing, picking out individual threads of conversation from the babble and clink of the five hundred and fifty voices and glasses around us. There was a long pause before I received Strike's answer. In the meantime I shook hands with the senior Committee officials grouped around Father and continued toward the empty table awaiting us.

I don't think it's anything to do with us, actually. It may be a false alarm. I'll keep alert for any change.

Very unlike you to be jumpy, Strike. Father and the rest of the team and I formed up around the table and remained standing while the Viceroy anthem was played.

A lot of this crowd doesn't like us, I guess. 'Bye.

Mmhmm. 'Bye. We took our seats. The dinner service passed unremarkably. I felt electric, sparks of my attention wanted to jump out among the other diners. Still I waited through the meal, through a series of speeches about peoples' contributions to the Sport, through the eulogy to the combatants who had died in action—twenty two this year, near half again up on last year's total—and through Father's acceptance of the Committee's accolade. A new Viceroy banner was added to the ranks spanning the walls.

And finally we were released. A corps of militarily efficient waiters cleared the tables. Bars appeared from behind storage doors, and in the room's center, where our table had been, a band platform rose from the

floor. In the initial confusion, Father gripped my elbow and whispered something to me.

"What?"

"I said, 'stick close'. I don't like the looks we're getting tonight."

"You worried about me, or about yourself?"

The old man's face screwed itself shut after opening a moment in surprise at my lip. He released me as a pair of Committee officials once again descended upon him.

"See you later," I mouthed to him silently, and I pushed away into the crowd.

There is something to be said for being tall, even for being about a head taller than most people. You're a good target, maybe, but you've also got range of sight. I found her almost immediately; she was wearing the green and gold of a Cavalier, so she must have been sitting directly behind us, facing away, during the meal.

Now she was ahead of me, queuing at the bar, and she was real. I mean, she had this definiteness about her; she projected a sense of moving through the world, instead just being a part of it. Trite as it sounds, recalling this moment I get that slow motion effect, pause... pause... pause... sound turned off, as she turns her head.

She didn't see me. Her auburn hair was trimmed short in the style of Arena novices, and the wide vee of her dress uniform shirt revealed her collarbones. The musculature of her chest and neck was sharply defined and shadowed by the dome's low light as though she had come straight from a hard session's training. The movement of her head was connected to a hundred little tendons, all, it seemed, clearly visible beneath her skin.

Very distinctly, I remember her face as it was then and at almost no other time we were together: unsure. The porcelain pallor of her sculpted cheeks was interrupted by a high blush, and her eyes, a cat's green, were shining and alert, flicking past her teammates standing with her, trying to see into the crowd. I had that advantage on her; she couldn't have been more than five foot five, maybe less.

I put my hand on the shoulder of the Cavalier standing just in front of me and enjoyed his momentary disorientation as he looked up. He tensed defensively when he recognized me and said, "This had better be good."

"Who's that?" I asked, nodding past him at the girl. "She new this year?"

"Uh huh. Look, I shouldn't be talking to you."

I quirked an eyebrow and smiled at him slightly. "It's not a problem," I said. *Sure you should*, I pushed at him.

"Anyway, she is new. Her name's Gabrielle. I think she's training for a team leader spot, but don't quote me. I don't know where she's from..."

"But she's good already," I finished for him. "Thanks, man," *and move aside*. This he obligingly did. I moved forward into a sea of green uniforms; beside me was a boy named Dreamer, the Cavalier I'd lost to with Strike last season. We'd beaten him badly this year in the finals, to his surprise. I noticed the remains of the scars up the back of his left hand where Strike had run over him.

"Dreamer," I acknowledged him. We shook hands. His expression was unreadable, and I didn't push it. I did catch him glancing around as though to make sure I really was surrounded.

"How many years are you gonna keep beating everyone, Zeke?" he asked. Under a shelf of multi-colored bangs he had small, dark eyes and a crooked nose, and his voice had a buzzy quality from an artificial enhancer. I'd heard he'd lost the best part of his trachea in the Arena some years ago.

"How long are you all gonna let me?" — standard banter for these banquets, all in all. What else are you going to say, 'sorry 'bout that lung'?

"Strike has shaped up well for you."

I grinned and took the compliment on Strike's behalf. Dreamer's armor had come out a bladed body suit that seemed to fit his up-close, fast fighting style. They'd made it about as far as they could, until they'd fought me and Strike. He wasn't really complaining.

"They say the best fighters can get the most out of an armor. It hardly seems fair." He laughed raspily, which earned us some attention from the Cavaliers around us.

"Ezekiel. Viceroy boy wonder," came a girl's voice from behind me.

"Right." I raised my hand and turned to her for a second. She wasn't anyone I recognized, a red-head. She had a team-member badge pinned to her collar and the crazy-quilt tattooing of a Razer.

On my left I noticed that the girl I was trying to track, Gabrielle, had her drink and was picking her way across the dance floor. After shouting an order to the barman, I then decided I couldn't wait.

"Hey, Zeke, what's the rush? Don't you appreciate our company?" This from another novice, a boy with a thick Souvan accent.

I put up my palms. "Everybody's company is cool tonight, but there's someplace I've got to be." I had to push through a lot of suddenly stubborn Cavalier bodies to get out of the line, but aside from a couple of gratuitous elbows, I made it through.

Gabrielle had found a spot a few yards away next to one of the Cavaliers' junior Trainers. He was obviously talking to her about some past practice, punctuating his sentences with ready stances and hand moves which she watched indifferently. Squaring my shoulders, I strode towards her. I wasn't sure if the goon would let me speak. "Excuse me," I said when I was near enough.

They both looked around. I kept wanting to stare at Gabrielle and had to remind myself that it was the Trainer I'd have to get through first. "Ezekiel," the man shook my hand and slapped my shoulder, "let me congratulate you on the season."

"I don't forget who got me there," I smiled a loyal Viceroy smile. "Our Trainer keeps us on our toes."

"If the Viceroys didn't have the talent to begin with, Simon wouldn't have much to work with, would he?"

It was clear this man had some agenda, something he wanted to say or wanted me to say, and I didn't feel like I had time for it. I pushed a suggestion at him.

His expression changed abruptly from a sort of sidelong craftiness to sociability. "You probably haven't met the Cavaliers' newest talent. Ezekiel, meet Gabrielle. She'll be premiering on the team circuit the beginning of next year."

We bowed slightly to one another. I was briefly startled by her intense scrutiny. Still gripping the Trainer's hand, I thought, *You can go now.* "Are you a bit thirsty?"

"Shall I get some drinks for us? I've been wanting to ask you some questions about your armor, hear about it from you personally. It's a beautiful piece."

"Great."

The man wandered off towards the bar on the farthest side of the dome, shaking his head. "What did you do to him?" Gabrielle asked,

swirling the ice in the glass she already had. Her voice was smooth and a bit deep for her size.

"What do you mean?"

"He looked so confused." She smiled radiantly. "What a bore! Are these things less dull when you're on the winning team? Or when you're at least involved in the Arena?"

"Honestly? No. But you get a lot more evil eyes. Intrigue. The stuff of life. I think your teammates would like to beat me senseless for what I did to Dreamer last week. But that was in the Arena, and we all try to pretend it doesn't leak out." I gestured over the crowd and then back to her, and I noticed she hadn't dropped her frank, evaluating stare. "What is it?"

"Who are you? I mean, where are you from, if it's not too nosy of me."

I shrugged, "Simon's my father. My mother's Marie Firelli, you know, the geneticist. Tagiere born and bred, I'm afraid." I gave it my best North Country drawl.

"What's to be afraid of? It sounds like you had every advantage. You must've started training young." At a questioning tilt of her head, we began maneuvering towards one of the tables against the outer wall.

Sitting down we covered all the small talk. Gabrielle was entering the Arena late because her parents had objected, but she trained underground and got spotted by a recruiter. In the end, her parents had accepted a large lump sum payment plus percentages. I remarked how sweet a deal that sounded; she must be good. She readily agreed.

I kept off the booze and didn't go morose on her. She relaxed bit by bit.

Finally she asked me why our evening was going so well.

"Is it?"

"Yes." She tilted her head. "Maybe it's because I'm on team events, and we'll never have to fight. We've got different styles. From the vids, you like to bring the fight to your opponent, right in his face. You're careless, but relentless." The words rolled out of her like she was quoting some sportscaster. "I wondered, watching you sometimes on TV, how you could afford to be so careless."

I interrupted: "Maybe this is going so well because we're so alike."

Gabrielle sat back in her chair, and I was uncomfortably aware how close together we'd been sitting. She put her hand over mine on the low

table and met my eyes. "We aren't alike, Viceroy." *Not at all, because there's nobody home, is there?* her mind voice caressed me with little subtlety; she expected no contact.

Don't do it, Zeke... Strike, now, coming at me from another direction.

Get out, Strike. What kind of warning is that? Don't do what?

Don't let her in. You don't even know what she is.

How much time was this taking? Instants? Minutes? I forced myself to see Gabrielle, to feel her hand. She was shaking her head, a half-smile indicating how I lived up precisely to her expectations.

Why don't you come in and find out? I sent the words out to Gabrielle hard and flipped my hand under hers, gripping her fingers. I knew before she did it that she'd try to pull away. As it was, she jerked her arm back, rocking the table and spilling our drinks. Several people seated nearby glanced our way. *That's right. We're more alike than either of us guessed, aren't we?*

Strike again: *Jeez! Think, man. Even Random warned you about this.*

He's not here. Now shut up. I tacked a mental growl onto the end of that. *I'm taking a chance.*

"Let go of my hand," Gabrielle whispered. She was blushing all the way to the roots of her hair.

I held it a few seconds longer. When I released it, I said, "I've been looking for you for a long time."

She stood, catching the edge of the table with the top of her thighs and almost overturning her chair. "Maybe I'll see you later." She shouldered her way out towards the curtain by the exit. *Maybe,* she was thinking as she went. I held the thread of her mind's voice by force of will. *Maybe? How can I avoid it? We're more alike than either of us guessed, he said.*

Hold that thought! I sent to her, just as she lifted the curtain and her thread slipped through my fingers.

Gabrielle froze mid-stride and looked back over her shoulder at me, momentarily the frightened rabbit. Then something gave, her body relaxed, and she smiled, dazzling even from a distance. 'Okay,' she signalled, and was gone.

I was still watching the curtain sway from her passing when I was smacked hard from behind. I spun low, sending my own chair skidding out to crash against some bystander. *Where the hell are you when I need*

you, Strike? But I saw immediately why she hadn't warned me. It was Father, taking up his guard like a boxer.

"What are you up to, boy?" he barked at me. His voice was thick and drunk. A few of the kids around us looked not a little afraid.

I slowly stood out of my crouch, unballed my fists, letting the adrenaline go. "I don't understand.' But I did. Gabrielle was a Greenlee Cavalier, a new Greenlee Cavalier, someone who might give away some training secret by accident. That wouldn't be kosher. The Committee wouldn't approve. "I'm sorry," I continued lamely. "We were just talking." The faces of the people around me said they might disagree if anyone bothered to ask them. "It's all right; I'm leaving. Too much to drink. Sorry, sir." I backed up and walked away from him, exaggerating a slight stagger, conscious of his and everyone's eyes on my back as I went out the curtain and into the corridor.

I told the attendant to sit while I brought Strike out from amongst the other armors. She was humming to herself, a fast beat tune off the radio. *What I did, that was stupid*, I admitted to her. *I think I broke lucky on this one, though.*

I'm not sure. The girl's feelings are all muddled. She's still caught up in a lot of things that happened to her, way before tonight. Bad things. Things I can't predict.

Outside there was a shuttle waiting to take people to the hotel. Gabrielle wasn't on it. In fact, as Strike and I were the first to leave the banquet after Gabrielle, the shuttle was empty, and in surly silence the driver swung the vehicle onto the magnetic strip leading to the hotel. I didn't mind. He hadn't argued when Strike wheeled up the ramp into the passenger compartment.

On the short trip over I tried again with her. *So, Gabrielle's confused. You're confused, and I'm confused. You were right, I don't know what she is, or how it is our paths crossed. But you should understand wanting to reach out to someone who is the same. There aren't any of my kind, here, like there don't seem to be any more exactly like you. I depend on you, Strike, I need you, but I think you're wrong. Even you said you weren't sure.*

Okay. I can see that. I can feel how much you want this even if I don't agree. But if she is 'your kind,' Zeke, isn't that exactly what Random warned you against?

"Maybe he should have been here to tell me that himself." My attempt at pouting didn't ring true, though. I had believed his warning, but this new, unsettled fear in me felt too much like being happy. *Anyway, we've got a pretty torrid affair to get on with, Gabrielle and I. However things end up, I don't want to miss it.* I looked out the glazed windows of the shuttle for a while, the spaced safety lights over the route passing with an almost audible rhythm. After a few minutes I asked Strike, *How good do you think she'll be?*

What, in bed? Give me a break, Zeke.

No. In the Arena. Somebody said she was training for team leader.

Of the Cavaliers? Then she must be very good.

The shuttle pulled up in front of a low, modern building fronted by rows of rectangular tinted glass. We debarked. Judging by the doorman, I figured Strike wouldn't be allowed in. In answer to my question, he motioned me around the side of the building to a hangar-like corrugated metal structure next door. *Be careful,* Strike called after me as she drove off to find an empty space to park. *Who will I talk to when you're gone?*

Briskly, I went back into the hotel through the front. I showed my ID to the woman at the registration desk, but she laughed and waved it off. "My son watches all your fights. My mum says it's a bad influence on him, but he loves it. Keeps him quiet." She smiled at me conspiratorially, as though I was in on this adult secret about 'whatever keeps him quiet.' "Here's your key code." She turned the flip screen so only I could see it; I memorized the numbers and cleared it.

"Thanks," I said.

Inside my locked room, Gabrielle was waiting. Her skin was cool from the air conditioning; her mouth, hot and ardent. She only said one thing all that night.

Risk it.

Ezekiel VI

On our first break next season, Gabrielle and I got passes to one of the preserves, a gorgeous piece of mountain range in central Tagiere. The weather was kept at a level guaranteed to maintain the trees at their lushest green. The silence was almost unbearable; even the insect sounds seemed dampened. "Gabrielle," out loud, whispering. "Gabrielle." Her large eyes

started open in the semi-darkness of pre-dawn. They were alert and perfectly calm. I placed my hand over her mouth. Mentally: *there are people outside the tent — at least four of them.*

Cavaliers. And there are six, she responded, *unless T-Bone and Missouri are late.*

Your team knows we're here? God damn it! How?

Her mind was a blank wall. I evaluated it without even noticing I did so: it had several obvious flaws, but none I could get through without pushing way too hard.

I lifted my hand away and broke contact. Without a sound I stood, stooping under the low roof of the tent, and pulled on my gear. As Strike was away — she wouldn't have anything to do with me when I was with Gabrielle — all that consisted of was my leathers and a short blade. I had to leave my jacket; the keys in it would have given me away. As I stepped towards the door I felt her hand on my calf. *Leave the blade, Zeke. I need them for the Arena in two days.*

Fuck that! Six of them; and they should know what they're getting into if they're following me.

Leave it. She looked up at me. I could hardly make out her face, but she'd sat up out of the sleeping bag and the paleness of her glowed faintly. I didn't look down as I let her take the blade off me; I concentrated on the noises and the shadows on the canvas when someone crossed outside the east-facing wall of the tent. Unconsciously, my body began to shift; I could feel the hardened sheathing spreading over my muscles beneath the skin. It's delicious, like a shiver up the back that lasts for three minutes. As it doesn't show, I didn't try to control it. I just hoped Gabrielle wouldn't try to touch me again.

I waited inside the tent flap until three were on the side I could see through. By his mohawk-shadow I identified T-Bone; there would be six, then. The breathing of my counterpart waiting on the other side of the flap was clearly audible. His back was to me; inches and thin canvas separated us. And he was scared, but hopped up on Zeroes. His sweat stank. At the right moment I drove my elbow into his side just under where his ribs joined his backbone on his left side. He probably didn't feel much, drugged, but the air went out of him with a loud whoof and there were

several muffled cracking noises. He sank down against the tent's side, retching.

As anticipated, the ones I could see froze on hearing the sounds. I used the moment to dive out of the tent flap towards them, rolling and coming up in a crouch directly behind T-Bone. I grabbed him by the left shoulder and the crotch and hurled him into the next-nearest Cavalier, a smallish kid who I'd seen at the training camp. Gabrielle had said he showed promise, but it wasn't showing this morning; the crown of T-Bone's skull connected solidly with the boy's chin, knocking him out and sending him over.

On my left I could hear my first victim trying to get his breath through the rattle of blood in his lungs. By this time, Missouri, the third shadow, was launching himself over the others towards me. True to code, Missouri's blade was sheathed. I kept thinking *six, six*, but there was no sign of the other two.

Missouri got into a pre-wrestling stance, and I mirrored him. He was big, my height and bulk at least, and he was well-trained. Unfortunately there wasn't time for a lot of posing as T-Bone was not out of the fight; he was already disentangling himself from the zonked kid and reorienting himself.

I lunged directly towards Missouri, feinted right, and tried to grab him by his right arm for a slam. He slipped out of that and got in behind me for a head lock. Mistake. I tensed and jumped upwards and backwards into him. He tried to get one leg under himself to keep from going over, and I heard it snap at the knee. He collapsed, screaming, under my weight. He clearly wasn't drugged yet this morning. We fell, him underneath.

I shrugged my shoulders out of his hold and started to rise into the oncoming T-Bone. He always fought dumb — I don't know why Gabrielle kept him on — and now he was lined up perfectly for an arm to the throat that would put him right down.

As I stood to follow through with the action, though, I felt something light brush across my back. My legs abruptly spasmed and went out from under me. I tried to catch myself and found I couldn't control my arms. I fell, stiff and full weight back onto Missouri, who screamed again. The metallic taste of blood filled my mouth, and my vision was shot through with stars.

I blinked rapidly and tried to roll back to my left and rise, but I spasmed again. This time I felt it begin, a buzzing just above my right hip. My ears started to whine. I remembered T-Bone coming in and tried to ball up to take the impact, but my muscles didn't respond, and anyway it didn't come. My heart stuttered and raced.

I couldn't hear anything. My skin crawled with wanting to change and I had to rein it in hard. After perhaps three full seconds, more than enough for any one of them to have taken me out, my vision began to clear.

I must have been gone for longer than I thought, because someone had pulled Missouri out from under me; I could see him propped up against a tree, staring dreamily. My left cheek was pressed into pine needles and dirt, but I couldn't raise my head.

Suddenly I could sense Gabrielle's mind; she was touching me, and I couldn't feel it. A cloud of panic rose in me. My back rippled and tried to scale. My shoulder blades sent out sheets of pain as the wing-buds tried to form. I held the shift, the thoughts of the shift, the guarding of the thoughts of the shift, in a walled corner of my mind like a pearl, impenetrable but obvious; it was the best I could do at the time. Even so, I burst into sweat and went cold.

Let it go, Zeke. I'm with you. Stay with us.

Gabrielle! What did they use? I can't feel you.

It's okay now. It's okay. But if it happens again, you're going to have to be conscious to survive it.

Waves of cold and heat were running over me. Faintly I became aware of her hands against my chest. I threw effort into it and jerked my head to the right to see her. She was kneeling over me. She had not dressed, and her body was tensed. She, too, was sweating, but in a haze of concentration and excitement. There were colored shapes behind her; I tried to shift my focus onto them.

No, Zeke. Don't.

I pushed it anyway, of course. T-bone was there, grinning down at me in his vicious-dog way. Beside him stood Francesca and Dreamer, members five and six of the Cavaliers. They, too, seemed pleased. Francesca held a heavy prod a meter and a half in length braced against her hip. It was attached by cables to a pack on her back. Her eyes were shining with adrenaline, and she kept licking her lips.

Thanks for calling them off, I babbled to Gabrielle. *You're gonna lose a lot of face on this one.*

I've got them in line. Don't worry about it. Now let it go. Let me ease you. Don't hide. Never hide anything from me, Zeke. She sent a flick of mental energy toward the pearl in which my secret hid.

Gabrielle! My last-second defence deflected her, though.

Through the whine in my ears I could make out a voice, buzzy and distorted. "He's not going to give over. Francesca, be ready." I knew what would happen next and braced for it. It wasn't enough.

Either my battle-high had dulled me the first two times or they'd turned the power up. This time it was very clear; I knew exactly what was happening. The touch of the prod came at the center of my belly. The heat was intense, complete. I went deaf. Every muscle fired and drew tight, pulling my spine into an arch. My heart spasmed frantically. The muscles in my right arm around the greenstick fracture I'd been healing overnight snapped the bone into fragments.

I was losing. I couldn't draw a breath. The rhythm of my heart had gone completely. I would die if I didn't change, or if I let go of consciousness, as Gabrielle had said.

So I did it. I let the shifting happen uncontrolled. Distantly I saw parts of myself rise around the shaft of the prod. Huge arms, my arms, bunched around Francesca and squeezed her, probably to death, in an instant. I didn't much care. The arms pulled the prod cables apart, and the pain stopped. T-Bone and Dreamer backed away, glazed with horror. I gave them a grin. Then I fainted.

When I became aware of myself again it was late afternoon. I was in the tent on top of one of the sleeping bags. My shattered forearm had been splinted to a board, but I had put most of it back into the proper shape in my sleep. Gabrielle was there, asleep in the crook of my other arm; she woke as soon as I stirred. My head thrummed with the dullness of a heavy dose of Zeroes, and I was grateful for it.

Magnificent performance, Zeke, her mind-voice intruded.

You weren't supposed to know. Why did you force it?

I hate secrets, she said.

I hate you.

Ah, Zeke, I don't think you mean that.

I might have died. I was dying.

I knew you wouldn't allow it.

And if you had been wrong about me?

"That would have been difficult to explain to the Arena committee, the way they frown upon death-duels outside their auspices. The Cavaliers would have been fined at the very least. We might have been banned for the season. I wouldn't have let it happen." She spoke aloud, propping herself on one elbow over me.

And how will you explain Francesca?

"Francesca? She's been missing for hours now. Went climbing over Blue Ridge as a training exercise. T-Bone was with her, but I think he was stoned. I hope they haven't both been killed."

I understand.

Good. That's good.

Ezekiel VII

"I don't want the title, Gabrielle. I swear. I'll concede, whatever it takes." I said it even though my next thought was that the Trainer wouldn't allow me to concede, not ever.

We were in the end room of a very seedy motel in Souvan, neutral ground, a place where we were slightly, though only slightly, less famous. We'd arrived separately and hours apart, and I'd spent a full month's winnings and thrown a lot of weight around to ensure our privacy. We couldn't have rumors of collusion between the top two contenders of the season. Gabrielle had risen with an almost perfect record in her league, good enough that our meeting in the Arena was becoming inevitable.

I sat up against the headboard, and Gabrielle adjusted her position under my arm to look at me. *Don't be ridiculous, Zeke. Your trainer arranges the matches, same as mine. You know how much money they stand to make off this? Especially with the tabloids hyping it as a grudge match.*

She was right about that; after Gabrielle reported the deaths of Francesca and T-Bone, some reporter had discovered my pass to Blue Ridge dated the same weekend. Conjecture was I'd caught them alone and killed them. Nothing was proven. There wasn't even enough evidence for a disciplinary hearing, and Gabrielle stuck to her story, but that didn't make

it less interesting to the papers or their reading public. The result: I was assigned bodyguards whenever the circuit took me to Greenlee, and I drew about fifteen per cent more crowd than before.

Gabrielle'd been assigned to the individual events a few months after the incident on Blue Ridge; her Trainer felt she cared too little for the kids under her command. The real problem was they'd follow her into anything, risk anything for her. So, she went through teammates like torn skin suits.

We stayed there a while, our thoughts private for the moment. I contemplated the weight and heat of her leg against mine, her small hand on my chest completely covered by my own. Her skin was very pale and stretched taught over curves of dense, compact muscle. Across her small breasts was a tracery of faint blue veins. I imagined the heart beneath, a muscle as strong and disciplined as the rest of her, wondered what small part of it was mine.

I frowned; my own sentimentality disgusted me.

After a time, when the room's cool air had brought up goosebumps on both of us, she asked, "Did you bring the disk?"

I nodded, resigned. "I'll get it."

She rose and stretched back, the matching fans of her shoulder blades arcing perfectly like a figure study in an anatomy text.

I got up, too. "It's in my jacket," I told her. "You want a shower?"

"After you." Her voice was subdued.

In the small, antiseptic cubicle that passed for a bathroom in this place, I ran the shower hot and stingingly hard. When I'd delayed as long as possible, I stepped out and dried off. Towel wrapped around me, I went back to Gabrielle.

She was sitting, still nude, cross-legged on the corner of the bed. Her short hair was tousled in dark, damp ringlets. She was facing away from me, intent on the monitor of the disk player in the corner. It was a replay of the Arena; with the sound turned down the moving, striking figures had an eerie, ballet quality to them. I couldn't associate myself with either of the people in the video.

I sat quietly behind her, massaging her shoulders. She relaxed against me for a moment, her eyes still on the screen. Then she went for her shower.

Gabrielle's disk was on the table, too. I slotted it into the second drive of the machine, set the monitor to split screen and watched. Some time later, Gabrielle came back, dressed and dry. Later again, the light coming through the privacy filters changed from grey to the sulphurous orange of the street lights. We kept watching in silence, a whole season of fights. If a particular moment caught our attention, one of us would backtrack on the relevant disk and replay it. Hours went by that way, Gabrielle in front of me, me breathing in the scent of her hair, both of us concentrating intently on the dance on the screen.

Finally I said, "You're better than me. I could throw the fight, and no one would be suspicious."

"I'm only better than you without Strike, and she's practically as popular as you yourself, now." Gabrielle used the remote to power off the machine. "I doubt you could get your Trainer to let you into the ring without her."

I considered this. Gabrielle had not objected to the concept of me throwing the fight, just to the details. "You forget how much draw there might be to a *mano-a-mano*; if the suggestion reached the Committee..."

"Or the tabloids... "

"Right, or the tabloids; he could get pressured into allowing it."

She turned to look at me directly. "We won't be able to practice."

"So? Like I said, you're better than me. Just look at the video. You stay out of my arms' reach, and I'll never get leverage on you. Pick a long blade. Or a pike like you had in that away exhibition in Tourneau. Just don't come in close, 'cause if you do the analysts'll wonder why I didn't break your back or something."

"And how do we end it? Nobody's going to accept a no-blood victory. If you repeat this, I'll deny it, but our Trainer's got everybody on the Cavaliers looking for ways to disable or kill you every time you go in."

"I'd noticed."

"And?"

"And, fine. We'll work out some crippling blow, end my career; two birds with one stone." Gabrielle started to protest. "Don't give me that 'I couldn't possibly' routine. I know you're capable. I haven't forgotten everything."

"Maybe I've changed."

"I don't want you to change. If we're going to do this, I want you to be the same Gabrielle I've known and studied. No surprises, except what comes naturally to the fight. I don't want to find you in some weak position and have to fake my way out of taking advantage of it. Somebody would spot it. Neither of us could afford that."

"Okay," Gabrielle nodded, then again more decisively. "Okay, and we've got five days to wrap our heads around it, but okay."

"Not much of a discussion," I joked. "Don't you want to know where I want it?" I was feeling around on my ribs with my fingertips.

"No! No, that's the end of it. Let's not talk about it anymore." She grabbed hold of my arms, locked eyes with me. *I hate this place!* Her thoughts were in turmoil; I could barely distinguish what she was sending for the background noise.

Helpless, I just watched her, tried to be the well into which she could overflow.

I've... seen things, Zeke, been places, other places, ways from here, ways from the Arena. Places I'm a god. Dreams. No one has these dreams...

Gabrielle, we all have dreams.

"What do you know about it!" she screamed aloud. *What do you know?* In my mind I could feel her flailing around, striking out. Out in the world, her body was still and tense, her pupils dilated to the utmost edge of her irises. *Get me out of here. I'm dying. We're not supposed to die, Zeke.* ***They*** *don't die.* Her body heaved in a gasping sob. *I don't remember why I'm in Hell.*

You're scaring me. Her eyes stretched open so far the I could see the red sclera all the way around. Tears flowed freely down her cheeks and off her chin and jaw. *Gabrielle, come back. Come back to me. Damn it!* Her connection with me was becoming more and more intimate; my breath was tight, and my heart rattled on faster and faster until it matched the beating of Gabrielle's. Her fingers on my arms were like a vise, so great was the rigidity of her body.

A bit frantic, I sifted through her mind, looking for something to unlock her. The structure of her thoughts was frightening in itself: circular; much of it secret, even from itself; and mostly controlled by fear and a red haze of rage. Except for the anger, her other emotions were quite generalized; she did hate this place and herself in it. Her wins in the Arena only

demonstrated her impotence, like a child stamping her feet when it rains. The anger, though, that was directed, honed and vicious. Briefly I was afraid to look at its object; it seemed somehow connected to me.

But the face that triggered her violence, the long-standing thing around which this vision of Gabrielle was built, was not mine. She didn't know whose it was. I did.

It was Random's.

I'd have pulled out then, if it had been possible. I'm not sure which of us would have been hurt more if I had done so. Whatever in our talk this night had started this in her still had her in its grip. She was completely lost, her mind a mad jumble of past and present and reality and dream. Her eyes and ears and hands were taking in nothing. It might have been better if I had left her there.

I was 'taking in,' though. I could feel the heat pouring out of her body as her blood raced sparrow-thin and fast and mine boiled along equally fast in its thrall. In Random's face, distorted by her dream into a torturer's mask, was a clue. *Maybe we can get away,* I pushed at her. Louder, *maybe I can take you away. Strike can do it, I think; she says she can. We'll leave Arena behind us.* Nothing yet. The fluttering of her thoughts picked at my concentration, threatened to take me along in its swirl. *We might make it.* Long minutes passed in the cacophony.

Away? her mind-voice, from somewhere, child-like.

Yes! Gabrielle, keep listening. We'll go.

Away to Shadow. Promise it.

Okay, I promise, I swear. Mentally I was gathering her scattered thoughts, holding her together. I spoke out loud, trying to bring her around and out of this trance, "Gabrielle..." Her body convulsed once, twice. From rigidity she suddenly collapsed against me. A silent moment later, she began to cry.

Wondering, I let her stay like that, curled on the towel in my lap, until she was quiet again. Tentatively, I put my hand down on her shoulder. "How soon can you be ready to go?" As I said it, my guts seized up; I thought wildly that if we did leave Arena, Random wouldn't be able to find me — Strike had said as much and that she didn't really know how to get anywhere specific. We might as likely end up on a fertile plain or in an active volcano. But none of that mattered. I had promised Gabrielle. I

looked down at her. She was wet with sweat again and her clothes stuck to her skin. For that matter, I, too, was damp, and getting cold.

"Um. I don't know." She turned her head in my lap to meet my eyes and reached up with one hand to touch the line of my jaw. Briefly, I sent a note of comfort down the contact, and to my surprise her mind was a clenched fist, for once its defenses almost perfect. "I'm sorry I frightened you." Rather than sorry she looked afraid, or perhaps embarrassed. There was no trace in her words or face of the ordeal she had just been through, of the precipice upon which she'd stood.

"It's all right. Or it can be. We can leave. Now, if you want, or we can ride through Greenlee to pick up your armor before going. There's no one I have to inform." That was true. In the end, if I left, Mother would only be glad I had escaped, and leaving this way meant I couldn't contact Random anyway, whether it was now or tomorrow or next week, unless by chance scheduling he chose this time to come and find me. I wasn't sure what Gabrielle thought he'd done to her; I sensed it wasn't something physical. Whatever it was, I couldn't reconcile it with my vision of him. He was still the master of this dog, the bringer of all things good. That I could consider leaving him demonstrated completely the strength I had given Gabrielle.

"No." She sat up, stood up, shook her hair out with her fingers. "I want to finish with the Arena. I want to be finished with the team and with the Trainer."

I thought of the powerless child stamping its feet and had to admit I felt it, too; and there was the promise I'd made to my own Trainer, the first time I'd felt my power.

"We'll do it just like you said," she continued, methodically pulling on her gloves and working the straps on her intricate boots. "I'll plant some words about a possible no-armors fight with my contacts. Approach your Trainer. He might buy the grudge match thing. Or he might just believe you want the extra betting percentage. Anyway, when it's over, then we'll leave, if it really can be done."

For about a second I could see the same little girl whose voice I heard in Gabrielle's mind; then she was gone, and the woman was back. She fitted a pair of image-enhancing goggles to her face, covering the reddened eyes which were now the only outward sign that anything unusual had

happened, and she opened the door to leave. "Gabrielle," I called to her. She did me the favor of pausing. "I love you." I don't know what I thought that admission of weakness would buy me with her.

She half-turned in the doorway. "I know. I wish it helped." The door swung shut behind her.

I lay back on the bed and closed my eyes against the drill of the overhead light, waiting for the morning bell.

Only a few minutes passed before Strike knocked. *Zeke, it's me. Open up.*

I don't want to talk right now.

Yes, you do. Open up.

I sighed, rolled my neck and shoulders, and went to the door. Working the latch, I thought to Strike, *how did you get out of the storage pen?*

You'll see.

I opened the door and glanced down to where she ought to have been. Someone's chest was there instead. Startled, I tensed to fight, looking up to appraise the stranger. I was looking into a mirror, or more like a photograph, the face not reversed.

They let me out. Undeniably Strike. Then, in my voice with my mouth, she said, "You may have to answer some questions about why you were in a secured area, if we stick around that long."

I kept staring at her, at me; the deception was almost perfect except that, in height, she was about six inches shorter.

"You'd better let me in before somebody sees us."

"Uh, right." I stepped aside, and Strike sauntered in. I couldn't tell if she was trying to imitate my walk or if she was just incredibly pleased with herself. I pulled the door to and leaned back against it, waiting to see what thing she would come out with next.

"Well? I had to get out. I couldn't think of any other way, without drawing fire. So I thought about you... I know you pretty well. I was worried. I heard Gabrielle leaving. She knew so much about you, I thought she must have..." Strike shrugged, eyebrows arched, her gesture in my body. "But obviously not." Then, rounding on me, "Have you gone insane?"

I thought about this briefly, seriously considered it. Other than talking to myself, I seemed okay. "Why particularly are you asking?"

"You told her about Shadow."

I realized I hadn't, that she'd known of it already. I wanted to be afraid, but I think I was too tired. "I didn't tell her. Somehow she knew. And she knows Random."

"And doesn't much like him."

"Are you telling me you picked all this up from her just walking by?"

Strike managed to make my features look defensive. "So?"

"Isn't that a little convenient? She probably wanted you to hear all that."

"I don't think so."

Exasperated with mysterious abilities and obscure motivations, I sat down, reaching around vaguely for my clothes. I remembered kicking them under the bed after Gabrielle took them off me. Sharply I inhaled; I had to close my eyes until the image of her passed. "What are you getting at, Strike? And please, change back. That's unnerving."

She laughed, still in my voice. "I relent!" With literally fluid grace she morphed into her familiar motorbike form. I dressed while she did this. *Now, Zeke, you need to know some things.*

Like I needed to know about you following me and Random to Bermuda that time?

I was worried about you then, too. Listen, I hear things, that's all. If they're important to you, or to us, I hear them. She knows too much.

You don't like her. You don't have to. I know she's dangerous, but that's what she is. Face it. That's what we are. You're just sensing that she's a predator. A predator is not dangerous unless you're its prey.

Don't be glib. Strike probed my mind, inquisitive. I allowed it. *You're going to fight her?*

Not exactly. I'm going to lose to her. Then we're leaving here. We'll try to do what you said, try to find someplace off this Shadow. If you'll help us.

You know I'll help you. I want off this ball, too. I'll even help if she's with us, if that's what you're asking, but I don't think it'll come to that. She won't leave here.

You said you were sensitive; she hates the Arena! She came a heartbeat from dying in here, thinking of it. The unexpected power of her terror: I projected an echo of what it was like to Strike.

I believe you. I still don't think she'll leave.

Why?

Because 'without our enemy we are nothing.'

I taught you that bullshit. Don't try to pull it on me.

I'm not trying to pull anything on you. It's the way she is. Just because it didn't stick for you doesn't mean there aren't people who believe it. Zeke, if you are ready to leave this Shadow, let's leave now. I can tell you've made your peace with the idea.

But I was only able to leave because of Gabrielle. Or, next time, maybe, if Random took me with him. Alone, I didn't know. Besides, I wasn't finished with Arena, as Gabrielle had said, that peculiar distant look catching her face. "I've got things to finish."

Bitterly, in a tone I'd never heard from her before, Strike thought, *I thought you said it was bullshit.* Static power whined around her. *The manager's coming. We have to leave.*

I strode across the motel room and entered a command to erase the video disks, strapped on my helmet, and pushed open the door. Strike moved silkily out into the orange night, waiting. I mounted her and leaned forward into the wind of her already swift acceleration. For a few minutes our bodies adjusted to each other minutely until we were practically fused from my knees down. We left Souvan behind us, heading for the flat horizon of the ocean.

At a nod to Strike's unvoiced suggestion, we avoided the commercial ferries and she shifted to another perfected form, an open hovercar, and we carried on seamlessly off the coast, hours of pulsing blue route markers the only scenery ahead of us. In spite of the emptiness, she refused to speak for all the remainder of the journey.

Ezekiel VIII

The pain of it! How consuming it was, transcendent. The heavy, barbed head of Gabrielle's spear entered my chest just below my nipple on the right side. With the heightened awareness I had invoked to be ready for this blow, I felt each layer pierced: skin, muscle, the integument between my ribs, the yielding lung, a resistance and crack as my own momentum forced the point through a rib near my spine, a rending as it exited. My sword hand flexed open, spasming.

Gabrielle's eyes were enormous, round pools of fevered excitement and terror. She released the spear abruptly, stepping back. For a moment,

stupidly, I thought to hold down the cough wracking me. When it came I was surprised by the volume of blood that came with it, so *fast*!

With both hands I gripped the wooden shaft protruding from the front of me, feeling the entry point. The elastic of my skin suit was holding up loyally. I think I smiled; the green and black feathers that had been tied below the spear's head protruded gaily from my wound.

I staggered, and the spear shifted slightly. The explosion of new pain made me giddy. A sound like a laugh puffed out of my mouth. Abruptly I sat down in the sand. Whether the crowd was silent or whether I simply couldn't hear them I don't know. I was upright for a moment longer, and as I fell back I remembered *barbed* and *exited*; somehow I managed to twist as I went backwards, so I ended up on my left side.

Hold it together, boy, I kept thinking. *If you lose it now, you'll die, or change and kill her, or worse. What first? Bleeding, that's got to stop.*

My concentration was interrupted by another cough, more of a retching heave, really. Something came up with the blood this time. *Isolate the damage.* It was an amazing thing, this pain. It had its own agenda, and even with all my discipline it existed beyond anything I could control. I thought how odd it was: I had never in years of fights been hurt like this. My punctured lung began to collapse; and I had a moment to contemplate the ridiculousness of adding the pain of separating tissues to everything else.

The part of my consciousness still attached to eyes and ears saw a shadow on the bright sand. "Yours," I tried to croak. Opening my mouth only allowed the release of another half-pint of me. My stomach, way behind on the information network, tried to rebel at the thickness in my throat. At least my shifting started working; the blood had stopped trying to fill my lung, and the vessels were feeling out a way around the obstacle of the spear.

Gabrielle bent towards me, a green blur in my vision. She gripped the shaft of the spear and the sheet of pain went wildfire again, driving away my concentration. I felt my legs twitch. *Good going, guys. Run on!* The importance of remaining conscious lost a lot of its lustre. I tried sending to Gabrielle over the distance between us: *You can't remove it. The barb. It's too much.* Harder: *Yours, God damn it!* I wasn't aware enough to feel if my message had hooked.

The world tilted. Briefly clear, I saw the bulge in the muscles of her forward arm as she began lifting the spear, me on the spear like a gaffed fish, bowing the oiled wood with my weight. I tried and failed to put my legs in order and get them under me. Looking down, I saw my hands still around the shaft. *Surprise them; they might obey.* Leaning back I pushed one hand forward and forced the spear downwards against the fulcrum of the other. "Break it," I roared, and it happened.

Gabrielle staggered back from the sudden release, and I fell again, of course. Wonderful hands! they kept me half upright and tried to drag me backwards. Quickly then, internally, I sealed off everything I could, creating a smooth-walled shaft of sinew around the remains of the spear from which maybe Gabrielle or Strike could remove it later.

Snap out of it, Zeke. Get up! She's not done with you, yet. A stupid voice, my own — the fight was over. We had been right, Gabrielle and I; I hadn't had to let her win. It had taken about eight minutes, because it was harder for me to get hit than I'd thought. Eventually, I'd moved exactly the way she'd expected. Her weapon and I had intersected neatly like the lines on a graph.

Now everything was too bright and tasted of metal. My left hand, pulling me along, brushed over my sword, and I fumbled with it until I had it across my lap.

I'm done, Gabrielle. Raise your arms. It's yours. She was standing with the splintered wood of the spear shaft in her hand, waiting. *Look at me, damn it; we're done.* I marshalled my legs this time and stood, my stance skewed by my pinned chest. I could feel the most minute sensations: particles of sand cascaded down the side of my face from where they'd stuck in my hair, my short sword swung by its strap from my left wrist. I doubted I could muster the coordination to hold it.

At last, she met my eyes. There was no sending, no mental voice, just a furnace of heat and anger. Slowly, elegantly, she raised the piece of wood like a blade and took up a flawless *en garde.* Advance, advance, with little whispers of footfalls she erased the distance between us. My awareness of the audience chose that moment to cut in, and its voice was an insane, unified shout.

Gabrielle came within her lunging range and went directly for me; I think she only wanted to see if I could still walk. *Back off.* That's what I

did. She kept after me, pushing. Once, twice, three times she lunged in and I blocked clumsily with my arm. Finally I took up my blade and blocked a fourth and fifth shot.

I could make her stop if I could close with her, and I studied her for some way of getting in under that stick. If I gave away my intention with a clumsy grab, she'd readjust; then I'd never get her.

I was near the wall on her side of the Arena; its shadow loomed over me and bisected Gabrielle at the knee. Her next lunge was another simple one, direct and fast towards the wound I already had. Expecting it, I flinched sideways and threw myself towards her. We made contact in the middle of the space between us, and I screamed as I slammed into her. We went over, me on top, hitting the ground with another jarring thump.

Gabrielle struggled under me, trying to flip us over or wriggle away. I heard, under the constant cheering around us, a dull, rhythmic booming noise. *What's going on? Gabrielle, stop. I'll roll over and play dead, if that's what you need. Just stop.*

I felt her reach around behind me. She grasped the head end of the piece of spear still in me and twisted.

My internal handiwork held. She only succeeded in loosening the weapon. Deliberately I reached back with my right hand and trapped her free arm by the wrist — her other arm had twisted under her as we fell — and held it out and away from our bodies. She was still bucking under me, trying to force some opportunity for escape.

Gabrielle, what is it? It was a demand, not a question, and it wasn't gentle. She threw up a defense in her mind so threadbare I hardly noticed it. It flew apart under the force of my sending and I dug in, careless of harm.

Her body heaved beneath me a last time, and her hand came out from under her back. In her mind, she surfaced and met me, clear and calm. *This is for your father.* She raised a slim, black laser and pressed FIRE. In a silent flash of silver her hand disappeared.

I blinked. In the next instant I heard a shot and a ricochet, followed rapidly by three more. The crowd noise changed to hysteria. Blood fountained from Gabrielle's severed wrist, covering us both in gore. "You bastard!" she screamed at me. Finally I was able to look up.

A few feet away, holding a long blade of microfilament fineness, stood me, Ezekiel. Strike. I heard another shot—security snipers. The bullet ricocheted from Strike's head, slapping it to the side. *We're going now, Zeke.*

I shook my head to clear it and grabbed the bleeding stump of Gabrielle's arm. *Where's the hand? Shit. Shit!* I squeezed hard below the wound.

Zeke. Now. The medics'll take care of her.

And I, to Gabrielle, *We have to go now. Hold on to me.* I put my free arm under her waist and tried to stand, pulling her up with me. *God, Gabrielle, help me.* I locked eyes with her, willing her up.

Strike backed off from us, taking a now steady hail of bullets with her which she waved at in irritation. She was backing towards the broken remains of the doors to the holding area.

I got Gabrielle and myself upright and set her down on her feet. Her face and lips were pale, almost blue. *Do you need me to carry you? We've got to leave. Strike's under fire.* In fact, Strike had retreated through the doors, and the stutter of gunfire stopped. It might be only seconds before more security got down the way she was leading us, though.

Please, Gabrielle. Nothing. I was still trying to keep her wrist clamped off with one hand, so I grasped a handful of the back of her skin suit and hoisted her up onto my shoulder. With what seemed infinite slowness, dream running, I pelted into the waiting darkness of the pens.

Strike was there noiselessly melting into her motorbike form. I let Gabrielle slump against the wall, her eyes glazing and half-lidded. Significant pressure had built up behind my grip on her wrist. Awkwardly I knelt in front of her to check her pupils. There was a clank as my sword on its strap hit the concrete slab flooring. Gabrielle's eyes started open; her gaze, fever bright, leapt from me to the blade to me again. We were frozen that way for a long second.

In one motion every part of her jerked alert. Her good arm shot forward perfectly into my blade's grip, and, braced against the wall, she twisted it, aiming upwards and forwards at my groin. If she had been whole, unwounded... As it was, the point of the sword angled into the meat of my thigh. *Trivial,* I thought grimly.

I took her jaw in my blood-slicked right hand and broke her neck.

She made no sound. Her legs slid out along the floor between my feet.

There was nothing else. Absently I reached behind me and with two fingers levered the piece of spear out of my back. It fell in slow motion.

She's not dead, said Strike's voice in my head.

I laughed, throwing my head back with the force of it while I spun and mounted Strike, who had bumped up behind me. *Right. I'm sure that'll help. 'Sokay, Gabrielle. I didn't actually kill you. Let's screw.'*

Bottle it. Idiot.

Strike fish-tailed under me, revving down the hallway. When I stopped laughing I scrubbed at my face with the back of my hand. The blood there was drying, drawing my skin tight. I sobered as a Viceroy Arena security uniform came into view around the corner, but we blew past him in a silent blur, and the next instant I ducked as Strike burst through the crash-bars of the exit.

Strike. Strike. "Strike! Pull up. There's something else I've got to do."

You want to go home.

Ezekiel IX

Simon was pulling the top off of a beer in the kitchen. He had unzipped his Trainer's jacket; a dark vee of sweat stained the shirt underneath. He had a towel draped around his neck.

Mother wasn't there. I'd been through most of the house before Simon had come home and hadn't found her, so I'd left her a message on her computer: "You did what you could. Thank you."

I was sitting on a stool in the dark corner beside the refrigerator, silent, watching. I had been for some time. Now Simon lowered himself into one of the tan canvas chairs by the kitchen table. He wrapped his thick, big-knuckled fingers around the can and lifted it. His hand trembled suddenly, violently, and foam sloshed out onto his lap. "Damn you, Random," he said.

The back of my leg was going to sleep where the edge of the stool pressed into it, and Simon was getting more and more ordinary as the minutes ticked past. Things were not going to improve. The pose wouldn't get any better. From my dark corner, I stood. "Damn him, indeed."

He turned to me slowly, setting the beer back down onto the table with a rattle. "I wondered where you'd gone."

I can only guess at what he saw. I hadn't changed in the two hours since the fight. My blood and Gabrielle's had dried to a dark shine down the front of my suit. The lined hole of the spear's entry still gaped in my chest. For all I knew it passed visibly straight through me.

"You know I'll defend myself," he said, twisting his thick neck back and forth in his collar.

I took another step into the light. "You know it won't matter. You trained me for this moment for a long time." What was my expression? I can't feel it in memory or reproduce it in the mirror. I advanced again. "Someone had to tell her. How many people know Random is my father?"

He just shook his head.

I reached forward and flung the table between us aside. He remained seated in that chair, though he jerked back abruptly. I tilted my head, considering. "Do you want me to kill you, old man?"

He looked down between his knees, waved his hands aimlessly. "My life…"

If he was going to talk about his life, I was going to be sick. "Let's do it."

It wasn't much, really. I felt I had nothing to lose; he was unarmed. When it came to the moment of his death, he still had one arm free, flailing. I had him up against the wall or maybe the cabinets; I really don't remember, though memory does hold the sound of his heels drumming against something about a foot off the floor. My fingers were sunk into the meat of his throat waiting for the end of his pulse.

That flailing hand fell onto my face, not even pushing me away anymore, just laying across my nose and lips like the hand of a blind man feeling for a smile. It was very quiet in the house. *That's right. There's no audience here.* I remembered training, Simon's savage joy in beating us senseless, and before that, Mother and I spending our time together quietly so as not to set him off. The pressure of a last sluggish heartbeat slipped past my grip.

So that's it then: you take the Arena with you. In my head it sounded like Strike's voice, but she was nowhere around. "No," I whispered. I was seized with dread; Simon might be dead already. His body fell to the floor in a heap when I released it.

Five full seconds passed, measured by the ticking of the wall clock. Five more. Simon suddenly heaved in a breath and vomited thin, clear liquid. Dispassionately I watched for another minute more. He didn't choke. When he pushed himself out of the pool he'd made and began coughing, I left.

Enemies and lovers, all ties gone, I went around to the back of the house to where Strike was waiting. *Very dramatic*, she sent to me.

Fine. Now it's done. At least I was crying. Strike took us away from there and into Shadow.

Ezekiel X

It's good here, Strike. You've done well.

I know you think so, banking hard on the wet pavement at sixty, maybe seventy miles per hour. *Still, thanks for saying it.*

The place we'd come to was deep green; low, broad-leafed trees overhung the smooth, empty road. The tarmac here was black and fine. We'd passed three cars, winding along this mountain path, in as many hours. Water from the rain of a moment ago sprayed behind us as we whipped the branches with the wind of our passage.

I was breathing again. That was the main thing.

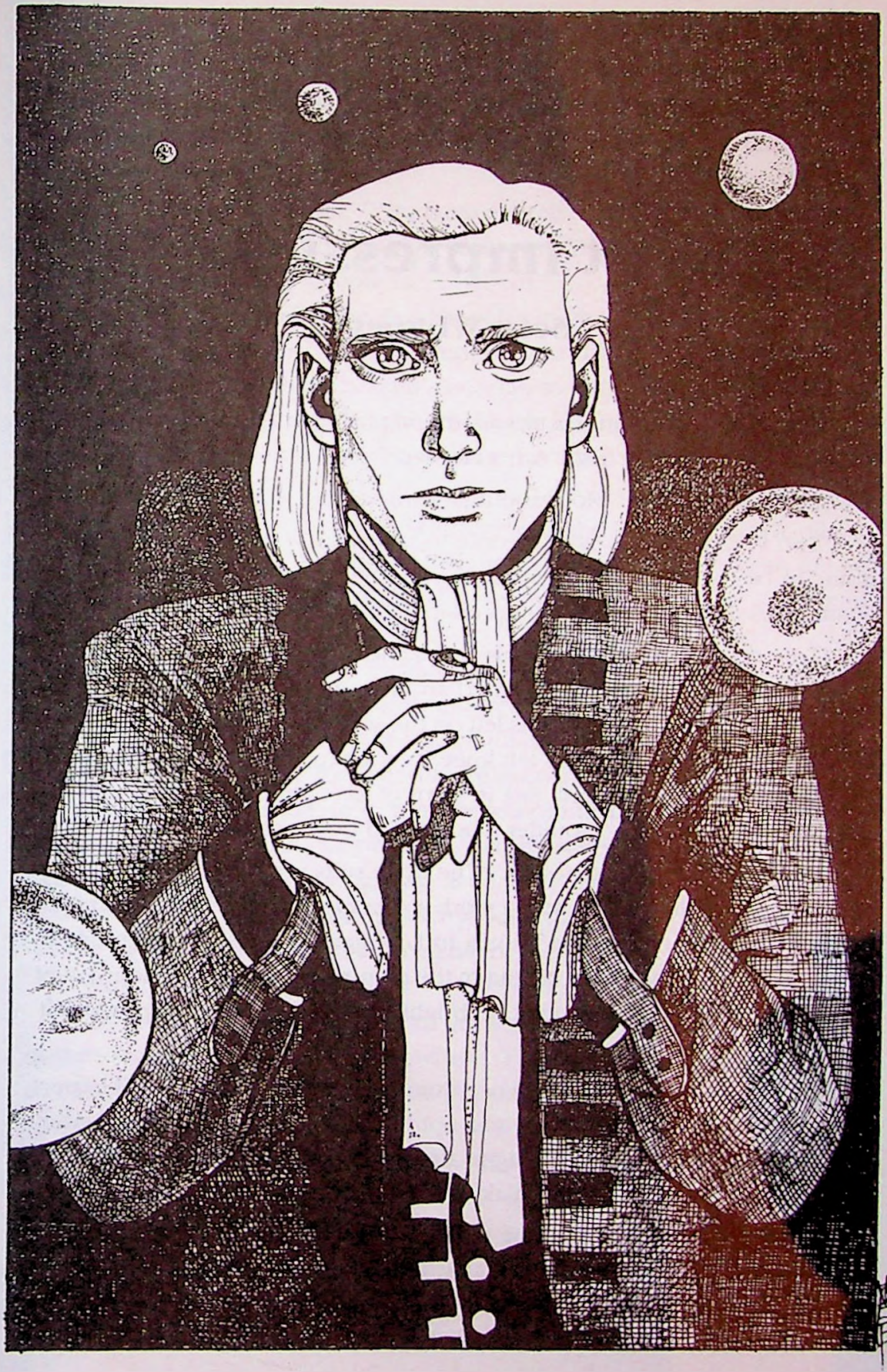
I watched another hundred miles pass us by. I know I didn't appreciate it, catalogue it, understand it. Just taking in the shade of green, the depth of the stillness, the hiss of the road, overwhelmed me. *Can we stop?*

No. But rest.

I nodded, mostly to myself. My legs were well integrated in Strike's midsection, and I leaned forward, morphing the connection further along, until my chest was supported fully by the forward housing of the bike. A new shower began to fall; I put my head down on my folded arms and let Strike carry on, and, as she suggested, I slept.

Simone Cooper *is an American living in London. She trained in writing in the States at both the high school and university level, but so far real life has intervened in her developing career as an incredibly wealthy, famous author. (Real life also threatens to interfere in her role-playing, but so far she has been able to hold it at bay.) Her e-mail address is simone@wyrdrune.demon.co.uk.*

Prince Ezekiel has been knocking around Amber for over two years now since he was developed for an ongoing campaign conceived by John Davies, "one of God's own GMs."


94.

A fascinating take on an Amberite's first Trump portrait—one where the subject is not merely depicted, but literally marked, by the experience.

First Impressions

Scott Whitney

Two figures stood in the moonlight, regarding the stairway. The smaller of them spoke first. "Arms crossed?"

"I'll look defensive. How about peering up the stairway?"

"Too visionary. You want people to take you seriously. People are going to be looking at this portrait of you for millennia to come, and in some cases forming their first impressions of you from it."

"True enough. How about this?" Alexander walked to the juncture of solidity and moonbeams, and turned around. He placed his right foot on the top stone stair and placed his left on the stair above it, his knee cocked. He placed his left hand on his left knee, arm straight. He dug out his syrinx and held it in his right hand, just in front of his right thigh. He tossed his pony-tail back over his shoulder, and smiled down at his mother.

Fiona smiled back up at him. "The pose suits you well, Alexander. Music and moonlight." She set to work at her easel, the first broad strokes setting his form central to the Trump and delineating the stairs behind him. "Are you sure you want the katana in the picture? That hilt protruding over your right shoulder says to anyone bright enough to look that you're left handed."

"Given, but if they're taking cues from the Trump picture, they'll expect katana work from me in battle, and not my weapon of preference," Alex said. "The axe is too damned big to fit into this portrait unobtrusively anyway. You know I'd rather make music than fight."

Fiona spoke without looking up from her sketching. "I know no such thing. I sometimes get the feeling that everything you do is carefully calculated to give people conflicting impressions of you. Some people say you seem more Brand's son than mine."

Alexander snorted. "I don't happen to be prone to fits of depression and brooding, unlike an uncle I could name. And I'm not a homicidal psychopath, either."

Fiona looked up at him. "You have entirely the wrong picture of him. His temperament is the precursor of your own. You are both driven artists, with goals we ordinary people can't fathom."

Alexander chuckled at the thought of his mother as an ordinary person, and then sobered again. "Are you implying that I'll grow to resemble him as I grow older? The very thought's enough to make me consider taking my own life. He's not well, mother. I get the feeling from him that his art is more a relief valve for his temper than the other way around."

Fiona was painting again, sketching in the folds of smoke grey cloak as they were caught by the light wind here on the height of Kolvir. "It's a pity you feel that way. We redheads burn hotter and brighter than the others, and you two are arguably the most artistic of our family. You could be good friends."

The wind rose a bit as Alexander paused, framing his answer carefully. "It's not only on my part, Fiona. Brand treats me like some kind of threat, and I can't fathom it. It's almost a self-fulfilling prophecy—his paranoia toward me is making me more and more hostile toward him." Abruptly, he let out a mellow chuckle, free from the venom he'd just been exhibiting. "Listen to me, talking about prophecy on the stairway to Tir-na Nog'th. Brand just rubs me the wrong way, is all, and comparing the two of us bothers me. Could we possibly discuss something else?"

"Certainly. What topic shall we cover?"

"Why don't you choose one?"

The wind chose that moment to grow stronger, affording them both a chance to turn their thoughts elsewhere. There were always things to discuss, but tonight, somehow, was important.

"What matters to you, Alex?"

Alexander was caught off guard by the sudden question. "In what sense?"

Fiona hadn't looked up from her sketch, but Alex noticed that she was nibbling at her lower lip. "Hmmmm..." she pondered, filling in the blood-red of his blousy, lace-cuffed shift. "No, no clarifications. What matters to you, Alexander?"

Alexander thought about that for a moment as Fiona went on painting him. Later commentary regarding the Trump is quoted as saying that Fiona caught him perfectly at that moment, liquid emerald eyes shining as he thought about what mattered to him.

"Nothing solid," he started off by saying. "Knowledge matters to me, and music. Maybe art in general. Other than that? Only the Realm and dreams. You know," he said, with an odd note in his voice that caused her to look up, "I don't think I'll ever have one of those great loves they write of in the romances. That saddens me, for some reason."

"Do you want to fall in love, Alex? I had assumed you took quite happily to the life of an eligible Prince, judging from the stories to be heard in the city."

Alexander looked at Fiona with laughter in his eyes. "And what do the stories say?"

Fiona chuckled. "It is said that maidens in the city are mooning their days away over the handsome Prince, who whisks his favorites off to while days away near waterfalls. Those emerald eyes must be quite an asset."

Those emerald eyes widened. "You'd know; I got them from you. But who is saying that? No one *knows* that!"

Fiona laughed. "All right, I admit it. I've been spying on you." She got sober again. "I had good reason. Playing around is all very well, but you can't afford to leave bastards behind you."

Alexander nodded. "I'd already given that thought. I have been, and am staying, on a diet that reduces my fertility. That, coupled with the low fertility rate of our clan, has given you no grandchildren so far." His eyes sparkled at her. "Get a thrill out of watching?"

Fiona ahemmed and put on an old biddy face. "I changed your diapers, young man."

"You did? I always thought that was Terry, the old woman in the nursery."

"Go along with you! Alex, what's your earliest memory?"

Alex's eyes looked away again as he thought back. "You're full of questions tonight. Is that part of the Trump process?"

Fiona was adding midnight blue to the Trump's surface. "Yes, more for some than others. This Trump will tell people a lot about you, Alexander. You knew it would when you suggested we do it up here, on this night."

"Where else? I'm one hundred years old tonight, born on or near this very spot. Why *did* you come up here on that night, anyway?"

"I wanted to get a look at the omens of your birth. You were my first child, Alexander. You were important. I came to the place where omens were important for the same reason."

Alexander went on gazing at the stars. "I think these are my earliest memory," he said softly. "The stars above Kolvir, at midnight on my birthday."

"I must say," Fiona went on, still painting, "that I'm glad you arrived when you did. A minute later and you'd've arrived on All Saints Day. I don't think I could have stomached that as you grew up."

"I know I wouldn't have wanted to."

"You're a childe, Alexander. You're a faery changeling in the very Sidhe Court itself, born on All Hallow's Eve."

"At least I'm not one of the kallikanzaroi, born on whatever that winter holiday is."

"Satyr indeed, from what I hear of your appetite."

They both laughed, and each went on thinking private thoughts for a time, Fiona painting and Alexander looking at the stars.

"I feel like a changeling," Alex said at last. "I'm not of your generation. Later on there'll be more to associate with, but all I've got at the moment are my uncles and aunts, and Oberon, and you and father... and you're all so much older."

"There'll be others, Alex. We're a randy bunch, when you get right down to it."

"Especially us red-heads."

Fiona laughed, her own green eyes sparkling. "I am NOT providing you with playmates all on my own. Let some of my brothers and sisters bear that burden for a while." She regarded him as she painted, seeing not only her subject, but also her son as she knew him. "Does companionship mean that much to you, Alex?"

"Depends on what you mean," he replied. "If we are still on the subject of great loves, then I suppose not, or I'd spend more time on it. If we talk of companionship in general... it matters. I'd like to speak to someone about my feelings who's not looking at them with centuries of experience."

"Do you think it would help if you went away from Amber for a while?"

"But I've just spent the past five years learning how to behave from Aunt Florimel! She'd be scandalized if I left now, just when she wants me around to show off." He chuckled at the thought.

"That might not be true, if you play your cards right."

"You're one to talk of playing cards tonight," he pointed out, laughing. "Out with it! You'd not be this specific unless you had something up your sleeve. What is it?"

"You're going to be a bit too perceptive for your own good one day, young man," she teased, then relented. "Oberon spoke with me today, and asked me to broach the subject with you tonight. He's aware of how well you turned out under Florimel's tutelage, and he'd like to show you off in a different way."

"How would you," she went on, "like to become an Ambassador for Amber? As a recognition of worth from the King of Amber to someone with more than a slight grasp of what to say in polite company, and as a present from Oberon to a grandchild reaching his one hundredth birthday today without significant mishap."

Alexander looked transfigured. "I don't just become a court fixture here? I get to do something important? Fiona, I've dreamed of things that don't come close to this. Tell me you're kidding," he demanded suddenly.

"I'm not kidding," she said, and he could tell she wasn't. She was absorbed in painting in the star patterns at the edges of the Trump, shining ever so faintly through the moonbeams above his head. "Oberon's considering giving you the post of Royal Ambassador to Gwynedd, a minor kingdom in the Golden Circle. He asked me whether I thought you'd be any good at it, and I said I'd think about it and get back to him. That was when," she chuckled, dotting her nose with a paintbrush, "he asked me to mention it to you. He knew I was going to do so anyway."

"I can't believe this, It's everything I could have wanted, Fiona. A chance to prove myself in something important, without any elder shadows to stand in!"

"It means an oath over and above the fealty oath you swore to King Oberon," she warned, "to preserve the Realm itself. Such oaths can be binding in strange ways."

"Such oaths can also open doorways of opportunity. Do you suppose," he asked her, wary suddenly, "that he might be looking into marriages of state?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know. But don't go jumping at Shadows. Gwynedd's not a big hotbed of diplomacy, but it is on the Golden Circle. Why, would a political marriage bother you?" She began doing detail work on the fine belt-buckle he wore, set with a hematite plaque. Getting the stone's sheen to show on the Trump absorbed her attention for a moment.

Alexander considered her last question. "No, I suppose not, especially if I end up married to someone with a like mind when it comes to politics. It'd give us something other than sex to discuss."

"You certainly won't be married off to some farm girl. You're a Prince of Amber. Well," she said, "it's finished. You can come down from there and we can go home now."

Alexander strode down the stone stairs. "May I see it, first?"

"Of course, silly."

Both were silent for a time, looking at it. Alexander was the first to voice the question. "Why did you paint white wings in the hair at my temples, Fiona?"

"You might not believe this, but I don't think I had anything to do with that," she said, looking up at the moon.

And over the next seventy-five years, Alexander's hair went white at the temples, and stayed that way. Alexander was quite happy to see that prophecy fulfilled. His Trump suited him perfectly. Moonlight and music. It made a good first impression.

First Impressions was a contribution for James Lebak's old campaign, the first one to start at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY.

***Scott Whitney** has been gaming since 1976, and playing Amber games since long before the Amber DRPG came out. He has been an avid proponent of the game since its release, and it is currently the only game he runs. He can be reached via e-mail at stormy@ftp.com.*

This piece is actually a set of brief vignettes, originally written as contributions for my own campaign. Gwydion is a physician of a type unique to the Courts, a specialist in disorders of shape-shifters.

Dr. Gwydion—Vignettes

Robertson Justice

I had just finished a 36-hour surgery in a liquid chamber.

I had done everything I could.

I had allowed myself to become infected during the process in order to continue. I shook as I exited the hatch; my skin had a yellow pallor. My assistants wrapped me in the appropriate medicinal agents and had me breathe a purple antiseptic gas. Even against all of the incomprehensible odds of success, my level of surgical mastery allowed no excuse for failure. I had allowed my patient to die.

A commanding voice caught my attention. "Dr. Gwydion." I looked up and saw an aristocrat dressed in swirls of purple and green. He was short and stocky, with swarthy skin and sword scars on his hands. He stood, still as death, and stared at me with his black eyes, waiting for my answer. A nurse interposed to speak with the man, but I held up my hand. I approached him, still shaking and half-naked from my ordeal, and looked into his eyes. I saw that he already knew the answer to his question. He hated me. The patient had been my professional responsibility, and I had failed.

The man before me was very disciplined; his accouterments and lavish armor marked him as a veteran of war. His hand, though, betrayed his feelings as it worked its way toward his sheathed dagger. I was certain he would use it.

"I almost killed myself in attempts to save your son, Lord Bale." His hand hovered near his dagger. "I gave my best on your son's behalf. The supporting surgical team are my best assistants. All of The Octagon's resources were pooled in this attempt. The mastery required in this type of psycho-surgery reaches conceptual levels of almost infinite complexity. I risked temporary madness a number of times during the transferences—"

Bale's speed was of a level far beyond my training. He struck me in the belly. I felt him twist and angle the blade up and under my rib-cage. I had known it would come. I wanted to be stabbed.

Everyone is familiar with the individual's desire to survive. Coupled with this desire, though, is its polar opposite—a desire for self-destruction. I have felt the force of this pull, and often wanted to travel in this direction. This desire for oblivion is the closest I have come to restoring my personal sensitivity and sensuality.

The force of Bale's attack lifted me off my feet. As I fell, I cupped my hand over his and pushed the blade deeper. I hit the floor, my white medical wraps and gown fluttering around me.

Lord Bale looked down upon my form and curdling chest. His warrior ethos showed him a man who was not afraid to die; a man who had overcome the limits of death; a man who respected his opponent's skill and was willing to accept his death with honor. I watched as his face found peace in those moments of silence, his martial codes struggling to explain my actions. What he thought he saw was not what I experienced. Finally he nodded and walked away.

I wondered what conclusions he had drawn, what impressions he carried away with him. His skill was great, yet his understanding was hollow. Could such as he ever know who I was? Even if I told him, could he ever fully understand a man who craved his own death? Could he know what it meant to be emotionally numb? To die would mean to come face to face, at last, with the self that had been lost in the cold and unfeeling world of my intellectualism. Blood and pain brought a baptism of feeling.

I refused to wail, for it would only detract from the intense pain. I wanted it. The medical team surrounded me in an instant. I lifted my hand to keep them at bay. They cast worried glances at one another, confused. The sight of my attacker, my blood, and my impending death left them somewhat disoriented and in shock.

Did they care? I did not. I had allowed my patient to die.

* * *

I walked into a room, if one could call it a room. There were no walls, only a gray outer-haze. In the center of its barren surroundings was a black pool, large and round. It was flush with the ashen floor, and it was inky black. I came to the pool's edge and saw my reflection in it perfectly. I was

both drawn to it and repulsed by it. I kept asking myself why this was so, yet I could not come to a reasonable conclusion. But slowly, almost as if I were feeling my way through an impenetrable fog, I realized I did know. I knew too well. My expertise had once again revealed another level of awareness. I was having a lucid dream. I was before a dark pool where nothing would reflect, besides me. The pool was my mind, my subconscious perhaps, or something beyond my knowledge.

I dared not take this situation lightly. Shape-shifters of superior skill, especially personae specialists, occasionally have dreams that are not along the lines of what one would call "conventional." I was, in an important way, in a real place. Any action I took here might have a significant effect on my future development. Rarely in one's lifetime does one come upon his subconscious mind in a dream. I might never have this opportunity for such self-knowledge again.

Just as I consciously decided to reach into the pool, something occurred. I had not yet moved when the pool stirred, and waves rippled across the surface. A man crawled out at the far edge.

It was me—but it was not me. Black soot covered the figure from head to toe, making his clothing and exact features indistinguishable. Atop his head was a court-jester's hat, its spidery tips falling to his waist. He had small fangs and sharp fingernails, and his posture was of an impish nature, as if he was possessed by something of sinister design. In mockery of my burgundy eyes, his were green. His smile was constant and appeared psychotic, as if he knew the terrible secrets of the pool. He just stood staring and smiling in my direction, as if he looked into my soul.

Was this an awakening or a warning? Was this what lay inside my subconscious? I could feel him across the pool. I was connected to him. He stood dead-still, smiling. Only his fingers moved, slowly, by his side. I opened my mind to him slightly. That was a mistake. I felt such a twistedness and darkness within that I wanted to scream in terror. I knew I was facing my worst fear. It was the unknown. It was everything I had suppressed throughout the centuries of my existence, which had become darkly twisted from being kept locked away, neglected.

Slowly, he walked around the pool in my direction. I moved so that he remained directly across from me. I was genuinely terrified. He knew I felt terror, because he was me. I trembled. Suddenly he stopped and began

walking in the other direction around the pool. I quickly adjusted to keep myself opposite. I was afraid to speak to him—I knew he would answer! All the things I've always wanted to learn about myself were before me. At last I had the opportunity to know them, yet at the same time I wanted no part of them. Best I continue to suppress what I had held back for centuries. I would never let this surface. Never.

I pushed hard on my mind to suppress him, but his smile grew wider. He knew I had brought him forth. I had made the conscious decision to pull something out of the pool, and it wasn't going to be so easy to put it back. As if in reaction to my thoughts, he darted into the gray at the edges of the room. He was gone from sight, but would he ever be gone from me?

I awoke with a start. I was fatigued and soaked with sweat. The bed beneath me was positioned awkwardly; it was half-gone.

An amount of mass had been taken from the bed—approximately my own. I suddenly realized that I was also experiencing a fatigue similar to having recently shifted. Black soot covered my sheets. The dream was all too clear. He was now wandering freely. I fell back, finally able to release my screams. They rent the air for the terror that haunts me from the past, and that which I knew would come...

* * *

My main specialty is persona/psychic alteration and its application to shape-shifting, and I am occasionally called to Hiellreld or Broodmoor—the House's hospitals for the psychologically altered and disturbed. Phelmune Gore, the director of Hiellreld, had sought my opinion on an apparently hopeless case of a Multiple Personae Disorder. I canceled my lecture on "Acidic Convulsive Restructuring" at the University to make the appointment. The students could wait, but never my research.

It is traditional to bring along a university medical student as an observer on such occasions. Because this was a special visit, I chose to contact Midyna. She was a quiet student who had shown a considerable amount of understanding about some of my theories. I had some admiration for her, as she had been brave enough to contest one of my theories on alteration methodology. Her dissertation and arguments were truly excellent. To enlighten her further, I did her the honor of countering her arguments with a written reply. A few days later I received a note from her thanking me for my insights, yet I could tell by her handwriting that

she was harboring both anger and frustration. She had really tried and knew she had been beaten. Still, she was a good student and deserved to be rewarded for her efforts. She would accompany me to Hiellreld. I paged her over the hyper-link. There was an instant shock and nervousness in her mannerisms.

"The university acknowledges your past efforts. I am visiting Hiellreld on a consultation. A carriage will depart from the front of Chanicut in one hour. You have the option of accompanying me during my visit."

Overcoming her nervousness, she lifted her chin and pridefully replied with a "Yes."

Midyna was waiting quietly on a small observation plateau before Chanicut. She was dressed conservatively and was careful to observe all the subtleties of etiquette required of her station. Professionalism and attentiveness to detail—qualities I respected. I nodded to her, but remained expressionless. We both waited in silence for our transport to arrive.

It was soon in coming—my favored Gothic coach with its black horses and cloaked driver. I had traveled with them before and knew them to be strong and sure along the treacherous path that led to Hiellreld. A dead silence hung between Midyna and I. It was protocol for me to lead the conversation, but I had no desire to do so.

After we rode for some time, unspeaking, the blue-metal prison-like structure of Hiellreld rose menacingly above the horizon. Its six twisting towers loomed like giant sentinels against the sky, spanning into forever. The carriage halted before a large antique gate protected by a guard with long, spidery black hair. He was dressed in an old suit of white-metal mail and leaned on a curved halberd. I pushed the coach's curtain aside, showing him my face, and he opened the gate. His mouth opened as if to scream, yet there came not a sound. The Hiellreld guards' voices were pitched at a frequency that rendered them silent to our ears. As far as we could tell, our presence was announced in silence.

Once inside the chill halls of Hiellreld, introductions and formalities aside, we ascended a series of riveted metal stairs. Phelmune was particularly cordial, even to having gone to the trouble of obtaining one of

my favorite delicacies: chocolate-covered scorpions. This revealed to me the depth of his concern for this particular patient.

I chose to take a longer path than usual to our destination in order to visit a piece of artwork I have long favored. It had been melted and torched directly into the metal walls by a forgotten inmate. It depicted, in an array of variously-colored metals, a starved Fenlareth Daemon drinking its own poisonous blood. The artist chose to entitle the work "Survival." I caressed the steel gently, all the while knowing a special connection with its author. I understood his flight of terror.

A few seconds later Phelmune spoke inquiringly, "You enjoy the piece, Doctor?"

I turned to him slowly, and paused for a salient moment before speaking. "We have a patient to see. Let us be about our business."

We continued in silence until we reached the cell. Comfortable couches, a standard table, and a soft-looking bed were its only contents. The room appeared empty from behind the invisible forcefield doorway in which I stood. I had briefly forgotten about Midyna. Now I glanced her way and found her staring at me oddly. She quickly regained her composure and redirected her attention to the room. I turned back to the room and spoke in a soothing feminine tone.

"Tjort, I come as a friend. There is no need to hide yourself. Change your form." One of the couches phased into a black panther. The panther loped and circled cautiously about the room, always with its eyes in our direction.

The multiple personae patient will often have a number of separate, yet fully-developed, personality forms—each of them surfacing to dominate a particular situation and purpose. The current personality was obviously the protector form. Though it took the guise of a panther, it was highly intelligent and capable of understanding.

I spoke soothingly, yet not condescendingly. I glanced at Midyna and caught another queer look in my direction. I decided to remind her later to leave her personal problems and raw reactions at home if she wished to accompany me in the future. Another fifteen minutes of soothing and well-calculated talk convinced the protector form to manifest into a man. His skin was rubbery and snake-like; his muscles taut and aligned along his skeleton for speed and power. Very nice.

He came to the forcefield to peer at me closely. I sent a pulse of psychic energy from my eyes into his in order to get a feel for his general condition. The pulse revealed a dangerously high psyche compared to what his charts suggested.

This was a manifestation of a rare and disturbing condition—I needed to contain him instantly. I lunged for the emergency PANTHA force field arrays. As I ripped off the safety panel to get to the controls, the hallway lit up with bright, fast strobes. In the silent madness of the blue flashing light, I worried that the strobes would trigger the very process I feared.

Indeed, the strobes acted as an exciter, altering Tjort's psyche. He went into a hyper-abnormal state of consciousness. In the confusion, Midyna made eye-contact with him, and he caught her in a hypnotic lock characteristic of a Primal form's psychic survival response. She began to drool and showed signs of preliminary neural twitching. Her psyche was being altered. Fascinating, but I could not let my fascination forestall my intervention. I had to act fast, or her mind would suffer a number of detrimental effects—such as shifting into another reality entirely, which would destroy her.

Aroughden's Theory of Transferal proved accurate, for Midyna turned in my direction with intentions similar to those of her assailant. She made eye contact. Without warning, she lurched into me, driving her now-twisted nails deep into my neck.

But all was well. What she really attacked was a statue of the first few millimeters of my skin, which I had shed as a motionless decoy. I was left with nothing but a dripping sheen of red over muscle and veins, but it gave me the opportunity to emerge from the shadows and use the PANTHA array to contain her. The shields wailed slightly, flickering and coursing like a fierce storm around their prisoner.

I turned my attention once again to Tjort's cell. I had switched to infrared sight with eyes that shifted in and out over my body, making it hard for him to lock eyes with me and assault my psyche as he had Midyna's. I felt his powerful psychic energy on me, but to no avail. Then, the final stage erupted. He was going into separation.

A security team came through the airlock in the hallway, dressed in protective organic battle-armor fitted with extending horned and dripping rifles. The snout-like helmets on the armor covered their faces entirely, and

added to the oneness of their mentality. I lowered my voice to the wavelengths of a Graevel Daemon and ordered them to keep their distance, threatening to form the secret compound to dissolve their suits. They froze.

Amidst the confusion, Tjort had gone completely into the separation stage. Various-sized creatures and forms sprang out of his body. The multiple personae that had formed inside him had become separate sentient personalities, and, panicking, were jumping ship. It was a picture of insanity. It reminded me of a technique used by the Torturers' Guild.

One of the survival forms was trying to adapt to the PANTHA field. That was about the worst thing it could do, for the shields were designed specifically to prevent this. A pain response usually ensued after the first few seconds—enough to stop any man or being of chaos origin—yet the featureless smooth-skinned thing kept going.

A spiky back-boned cobra form savaged a child sized chicken-demon. A lurching blob of thorns clung to the top of another thrashing form of lilac light. A four-foot glistening, bladed, steel diamond spun like a top, so fast that the air whistled. A slowly churning pool of blood spewed bursts of purple flame. In the corner, an image of me stood frozen within a shadowy translucent pillar. One of the forms was shaped into what appeared to be a semi-transparent four-dimensional cube, and was now in the corner attempting to bend reality around itself—presumably attempting to open a way out. A replica of Midyna's form, within the cell, pleaded with me to help her.

I remained expressionless the whole while, taking in observations for future experiments, and research theory. After observing the scene until I felt there was nothing more I could learn, I motioned to the security team to clean up and reported the dangers of the strobes. There was nothing more I could do.

It took a few hours for Midyna to recover before we began our return trip. She was shivering and stared into the distance. I stared back for a long period before I spoke.

"You have had a disturbing experience in which most of your rational processes were combined into an emotional—"

Midyna screamed as if to stop the pain of my words. The experience had been a psychic violation; she was showing strong reactionary

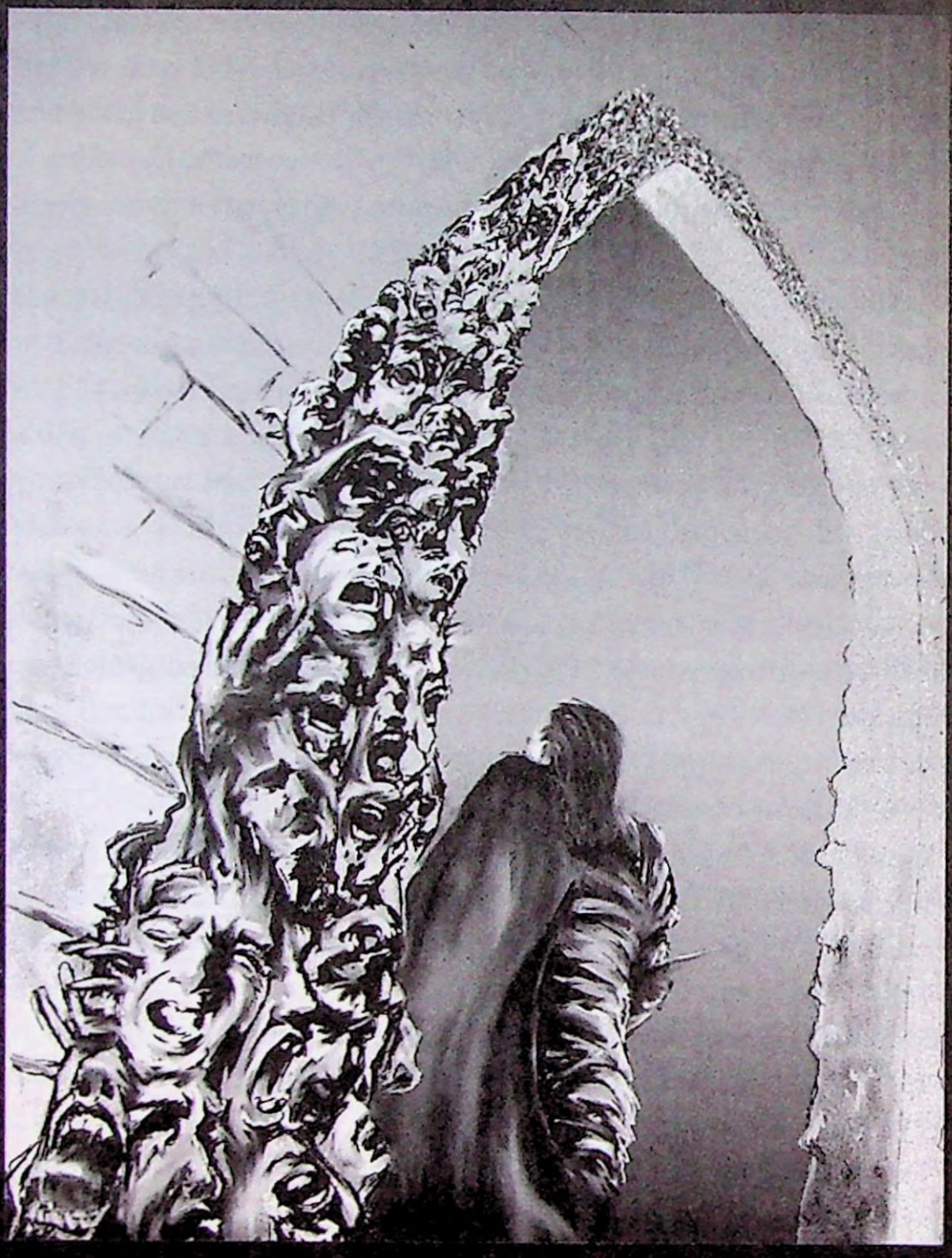
symptoms. After some time, she admitted that her previous silences were due to the fear she felt towards me. She saw me as a heartless vampire, full of cold analogies. She said that some people cover their emotions, but with me, it was an icy nothingness. She seemed to be obsessed with telling me how terribly I had affected her. I saw this as therapeutic and encouraged her to continue. I spent the rest of the journey listening to her bare her pain. It was only the beginning of the extensive therapy she would ultimately need.

I take Midyna's fate upon my shoulders. She was my professional responsibility, and, more importantly, a colleague who had earned my respect. I had allowed her to come to harm. Midyna had trusted in my professional judgment, and I had failed to protect her. I could not have insulted myself and my abilities to any greater degree than by allowing this to happen. I felt profound disgust for my lack of foresight. I would have to apply myself to my work harder than I have ever before in the past.

After I dropped Midyna off at a private hospital, I had the coach bear me home. The evening was peaceful in its softly filtered red glow. I could smell smoldering ash in the distance. I gazed numbly around me, half-hypnotized by my thoughts as they turned over and over repeatedly in my mind. It would be a comfort to return to the depths of Graadle.

The coach rolled to a stop before the black steel doors of Chanicut. They were tall and narrow and bore carvings of a thousand faces screaming in torment, ecstasy, and an evolution of emotions I would never know. The doors opened slowly as I walked toward them; Chanicut's night-watchers had been expecting me. Stoop-shouldered, they strained against the weight of the doors. Their eyes were small and narrow-set. Over the centuries, they had adapted to the perpetual darkness.

The main concourse was empty as usual. I followed it further into Chanicut's depths. I ascended stairways of great breadth, which eventually became dustier and showed signs of less traffic. I came to a huge, rectangular ballroom. Ornate chandeliers and paintings of long-forgotten faces hung ominously in the half-shadows. My footsteps clicked and echoed on the grey stone floor. Ahead, through the archway at the far end, I saw the stairway that would lead me to my destination. It was exceptionally steep and narrow, and I was careful to steady myself on its horned and snakelike railing.



I climbed until I was surrounded by total darkness. I clung to the railing as my only anchor, and made my way steadily upward into the shapeless, colorless abyss. During this ascent my sense of time became, as always, abstract. I continued, when suddenly a dank, familiar smell rose to greet me. A breeze, ever so faint, told me I was near the top.

Finally, I reached level ground. The air was thick with desolation. It was vast and gloomy, empty and ancient, a labyrinth of crumbling obsidian pillars. There was no light to speak of, yet a shifting dimness pervaded the area, with no perceptible source. Veiny black leaves of unknown origin blew in the breeze along the cold stone floor. Along the outer reaches, deep in the gloom, at the edge of the House's periphery, there were no walls. Beyond, the sky was clear and the winds were menacing. Chill gusts randomly whipped and howled lethally. The shadows were not only deep, but were known to play peculiar tricks on the eye. This void within Chanicut, this dark skeletal gap between levels, was carefully spoken of as "Graadle."

Of Graadle, much has been whispered, yet little actually understood. Despite its apparent emptiness, there were visions of ill-omen and whisperings within the howling winds. There were unusual items of alien and twisted origins and stories of men who were overcome by slumber only to wake months later as half-starved skeletons. There were even reports of confrontations with dead enemies, and abstractions of oneself, and stories of those who returned in rigid silence, and who thereafter refused to emerge from their personal chambers.

For my part, its desolate atmosphere and penetrating coldness have always afforded me comfort. I cannot explain why I have never experienced any of its reported bizarre effects; perhaps it is because I wanted it to open its dark arms and envelop the numbness within me.

I spent little time there that evening, and went instead upwards to my chambers by melding into, and ascending through, a nearby pillar. In my rooms, I met the silence. I rubbed my temples, feeling a need for something I could not pinpoint. But then, I knew—she would sing tonight.

During quiet evenings alone, I sometimes send for the servant girl Larsinja. She is but 12, frail framed, quiet, with dirty looking blond hair, and a downward gaze. Even though she is a well treated servant, she chooses to wear the clothes of a waif. She is a sad little girl, but possessed

of a remarkable talent to sing. I usually call upon her late at night. She comes to my door always in a shiver. She fears me terribly. She never changes.

It was always the same. When she sang she always stood away from me, next to the leaded glass windows in the library, always in a huddled position, embracing herself as if to ward off the cold. I always stood in the shadows.

When she began, it was always softly, always with the haze of the night limning her shape through the windows. How small and vulnerable she appeared, a captured doe crying for her mother. I was the twisted vampire who drank of her exposed innocence—or so many would think. I would not pain her were it not for the depth of her singing. My custom was to listen, while standing quietly and sipping brandy. When she was done, I would dismiss her with a wave, and she would scurry hurriedly away.

This night, I sat on a high-backed couch. There came a soft knock on my door. I waited until it came again. Then I rose slowly, the night as my shield, and made my way towards its faint beckoning. It was her, and we began as always—she by the windows; I in the shadows.

She began. Immediately I sensed a change. There was an angelic tremor to her voice, new highs and lows, crescendos and falsettos I had never heard before. Lightning filled the sky behind her. Its light silhouetted her form. Unconsciously I stepped further into the shadows. Then, I was frozen, hypnotized. I felt myself shivering as she continued to sing. The lightning flashed in counterpoint to her song. Her shivering and mine were in ironic synchronicity. Long moments passed. As she continued to sing, I heard unrecognizable sounds coming from my throat, sounds which were strained and unintentional. I had to lean against the wall for support. What had changed?

At the next crack of thunder, I felt tears stream in a torrent down my face. I could no longer conceal the moans that I had held trapped in my throat. Collapsed against the wall, I wept helplessly. Her singing had pierced my eternal apathy; touched the loneliness that had for so long clouded my hope. I was certain she could hear me, yet her singing did not falter. Emotions old and new, of ecstasy and terror, overwhelmed me.

She must have sung for two hours. Calm slowly settled over me as her last verses receded. I felt my face. It was swollen. I stepped from the

shadows, unashamed, and came close to her for the first time. Only a slight trembling betrayed her nervousness. I leaned forward and kissed her gently on the forehead, paused, then softly gestured her permission to leave. I listened to the sounds of her running echoing through the cold stone corridor.

Many long minutes after the sound of her running had drifted from my mind, I felt my emotions begin to creep slowly away, receding once again into the darkness where they had slept undisturbed for centuries.

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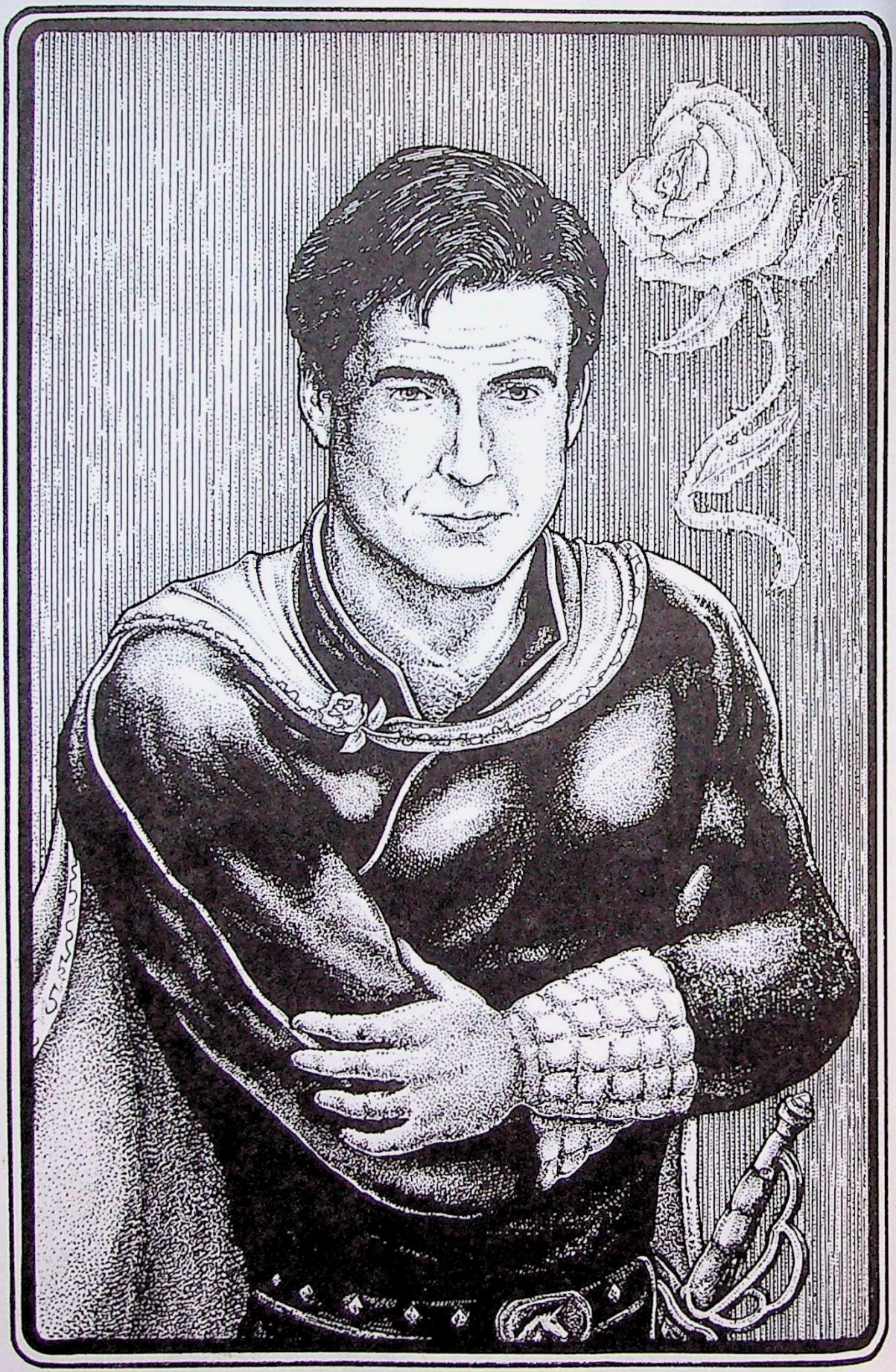
Rob would like to thank Jason Justian for his advice, and would like to extend special thanks to his father, George Justice, for his comprehensive revisions and critiques.


ZIM

Kajina's Story is set in a dark universe in which Brand rules Amber.

Written In Blood:
Kajina's Story
Shai Ingli

Seventeen years after Patternfall

A slender, long-legged woman strode swiftly through a forest of jagged blue menhirs and mute grey tents, just as the orange sky above everything was beginning to fade yellow. Her serene expression seemed at odds with her haste, although her ground-eating pace appeared more natural than anxious.

The summons had been brought less than half an hour before, bearing it with the order to come alone. Kajina had spent the time between then and now leaving her forces under the command of her colonels and giving her last orders for the day, in case she would not be coming back.

She returned the salute of the guards at the command tent as she approached it, then unbuckled her sword belt. The mirror steel swans twined around Svetaslaf's hilt flashed as she surrendered the scabbarded blade. After removing and handing over her helm, Kajina pushed aside the tent flap and entered without a sound, snapping to rigid attention as soon as her boots cleared the threshold.

The tent's interior was austere, containing only a large circular table and a display easel. Benedict sat in his usual chair, writing something on a piece of paper. He did not look up as Kajina entered.

"At ease."

The table's other occupant, a dark man in a green leather jerkin, smirked at her as she relaxed ever so slightly, exactly within regulations. Only her eyes noted this.

Caine.

Unhurriedly, Benedict finished, signed the letter neatly, and set his quill aside. With a smooth motion of his single hand, he folded the paper, then sealed it and offered it to Caine, who tucked it away in his clothing.

Benedict pushed his chair back noiselessly and stood, studying Kajina as if he were weighing options in his mind. Then, he took his cloak from where it was doubled up on the table, draped it around his shoulders, and moved towards the exit.

"Walk with me," he said to her.

Caine began to rise from his seat.

"I..."

Benedict favored him with a withering glance.

"You will stay here," he decreed, his tone colder than Kajina had ever heard it. "I will tell her."

He did not remain in the tent long enough for Caine to regain his color.

Kajina followed Benedict outside, then away from the tent, after pausing only long enough to retrieve Svetaslaf and her helm from the guards. She tucked the latter in the crook of her left arm, after securing the blade on her right hip.

She and Benedict walked through the rocks for a time in silence, she trailing him by an almost imperceptible distance, as befitted her station, and was required to follow his lead without hesitation. He did not speak until they had left the encampment some distance behind.

His voice was emotionless.

"You will not be taking place in the attack today. It appears that your skill has attracted King Brand's attention. He has ordered your reassignment. Caine is here to convey you back to Amber."

A slender line creased Kajina's brow.

This does not make any sense. I believe I would be more useful to Amber here.

Unless Brand is to send me elsewhere, after meeting with him in Amber? Perhaps.

The crease vanished as soon as Kajina noticed the slight motion of Benedict's head, as he tilted it to look at her. He studied her face for a moment before continuing.

"You have been a good student. You learn faster and have more potential than any I have ever taught. And you are my best general." His tone was still flat, as if he were only stating the facts.

He stopped walking, and turned to face Kajina. After another quiet study of her face, he lifted his hand, and laid it slowly on her shoulder,

almost as if he were trying to avoid startling her. His hazel gaze turned from the steep angles of her cheekbones to meet and hold her steel grey eyes.

A knot crept into the pit of her stomach, but she did not flinch.

Benedict would not harm me.

A very faint tremor of emotion crept into Benedict's voice.

"I have something to ask of you before you go," he whispered. "I would like to have something to remember you by. This is not an order, Kajina. It is a request. This thing is meaningless unless it is freely given and freely taken. Do you understand me?"

Kajina nodded slowly while fighting the sudden urge to tear her eyes away from his. The blood in her face surged hot, just on the threatening edge of a blush.

He wishes to mark me in his memory.

This is an honor.

Benedict's face made the subtlest of changes; an infinitesimal relaxation of taut facial muscles in synch with a softening of his gaze.

"It is your choice entirely, Kajina."

She matched her careful words to the tone of his whisper.

"I understand. And whatever you request shall be freely given."

Benedict said nothing as his hand dropped from her shoulder. His arm moved fluidly to enfold and support her as he moved even closer. After a heartbeat, his hand—the same hand which had guided Kajina unerringly through a multitude of forms and exercises—began massaging her back in a delicate pattern. The stump of his other arm was tucked carefully against her side.

Kajina's right foot shuffled on the ground before she willed it to be still, the one motion which escaped before she checked the urge to jerk away. Benedict's hand felt out of place against her back, inappropriate, yet...nice.

She stood stock still and tried to keep the mixture of puzzlement and wonder out of her expression. As moments passed, this gradually became easier.

Benedict held her close, not in a crushing grip, but one that was firm and casual. She could feel his heartbeat and the even cadence of his breathing, and his scent—the smell of soap, oiled steel, and another, comfortably musky odor which she could only describe as him—filled her

senses. His body was pressed against hers, lean and strong, warm and gentle.

It...rippled.

Kajina tensed, but did not pull away.

Benedict's hand continued to move against her back soothingly, and she slowly relaxed.

Then, a second hand brushed against Kajina's short scarlet hair, lifting a thick strand of it from her brow.

She started, dropping her helm as she twisted around to see what was going on. Benedict let her move as she wanted, but continued to hold her as he waited for her to calm down.

He had both of his arms and both of his hands.

"First surprise," he murmured, as he brushed her jaw with the knuckles of his new hand. "You now know something no one else does." He then pulled her close again, and held her without speaking.

Kajina was grateful that he did not look at her for very long. Her face was flushed with embarrassment.

It is shameful to be afraid when there is no reason for fear.

But...why does he maintain the charade of having only one arm?

And why does he show me the truth? Why is he...

I do not understand.

After several minutes had passed, Benedict moved back slightly to look into Kajina's eyes again.

"Second surprise," he announced quietly. "This will hurt a little, at first." His mouth quirked briefly.

He kissed her lightly on the lips, like a butterfly alighting and flying away again, as he unfastened her gorget with one hand, let it fall, then pushed back the thin laminar mesh hood from the rest of her hair. His warm callused fingers stroked the skin of her throat, tracing almost the same pattern there as his other hand continued to detail against her spine. The only difference was the delay between them; one followed the other close enough to seem a shadow of it.

Kajina's eyes closed as Benedict's fingertips found her chin and circled it in a lingering loop, then passed beyond it to trace the outline of her thin mouth. Her nerves began to tingle, both in appreciation of his deliberate caresses, and in anticipation of where they might glide over next.

Benedict's hands moved as if he were anticipating Kajina's neural calculations, and wished to keep surprising her. But, always, each operated as a vaguely laggard twin of the other, stimulating and lulling at the same time.

Kajina murmured huskily as the last atom of tension oozed from her body.

This is pain?

She felt a damp pressure against her brow as Benedict kissed it, then the weight of his head as he inclined it slightly, resting his forehead against hers.

After another lurch of Kajina's pounding heart, something salty stung her cheek as it dripped down from above.

Ra—no, not rain. A tear? But, I'm not...

She creased open her eyes. Benedict's gaze filled her own with muddy wet green, before his heavy eyelids drooped to conceal this.

Kajina froze.

This is pain.

I have hurt him, but I do not know...

Why?

Kajina opened her mouth to let this question fly out, but it refused to come off its perch in her brain. She swallowed down the breath she exhaled to flush it out. As if sensing the turmoil in her mind, Benedict's caresses faltered brokenly, and his arms fell away from around her.

Her turmoil became horror when she sensed the loss.

No! I didn't mean...

Since her voice had failed her, she let her lips speak her intent. Her mouth found his clumsily, sacrificing grace for speed.

Benedict's response was swift and brutal; the inside of Kajina's lower lip split against her teeth when he returned her kiss. She tasted blood, first hers, then his, as her mouth opened to him.

First the taste, then the pain.

It was freezing hot and burning cold, searing first through all the capillaries under her skin, then surging deeper; blazing through larger, deeper vessels, melting and congealing neurons as it tore through them. This was nothing like even the pain of her earliest instruction, when

strangers would hurt her at random to teach her to learn faster. Nothing at all like the pain once felt by a confused little girl.

Then, it all simply went away, as if it had never been there.

A soft voice spoke inside her. It was Benedict's, but it was so unlike the voice she was familiar with. It was kind and caring, tinged with a hint of regret.

Kajina?

She barely felt his physical presence, and was only slightly more cognizant of her body's response to him—those both were outside, and Benedict was inside with her. Knowing this made her questions less urgent. They were still there, of course, but she knew that he would answer them in time. And, if he did not, perhaps this was for the better.

Yes?

Do not be afraid. I know a part of you trusts me. I value that and I hope what I do now will sustain that part through the time to come, though we may not speak again soon, or ever.

There is not much time. Caine will report his suspicions, and Brand will ransack your mind, looking for any hint of rebellion. But he will find nothing of this. Even he cannot reach this deep, though he may bury it so far you cannot touch it either. You would break first, and I do not think he means to destroy you. Because of what you have given me freely, these memories will rest here.

Brand. If only there was an alternative. If someone were to show me a way with but an equal chance of success or failure, I would take it. Fiona is gone now, I know not where, but she could not give me that. Whatever he does to you, keep your eyes open. Someday I may need what you see.

Through the dim haze of the sensations experienced by her meat self, she perceived a ripple course through Benedict's body again. Parts of her chuckled. There was no need to be afraid.

I do not know why he is taking you from me. Perhaps to send you against Rebma. Perhaps he fears you at my side. Perhaps to kill someone he thinks I will not. Or, perhaps merely to spite me. I am sorry, Kajina, that you are to become a pawn so soon.

And I am sorry that I am always too late to express what I feel. I wish it could be otherwise, but it is the way I am. If there is anything

that you wish to ask of me before I must send you away, Kajina, ask it now.

A question, unbidden, embarrassing, blossomed in the pit of Kajina's mind, and she shoved it away. Benedict trusted her enough to give her these secrets, or valued her enough as a pawn to invest her with them. It did not matter. She did not wish to know the boundaries of his feelings for her.

Another question popped up in place of this one, one of a less gentle nature. Benedict had just demonstrated that he was capable of doing things similar to the creatures they fought against; did that mean that he was not the real Benedict, but one of them? One who was plotting to destroy Amber?

No. It would not make sense, if that were the case. Ancient Dworkin was said to be of the blood of Chaos. It was likely that his progeny — even she — could bend their forms into others, if they realized their latent talent. This was Benedict. And Benedict cherished Amber.

The third question, she asked, hoping he would understand why she was baffled that he would choose to be handicapped when he could be whole.

Why do you wear only the one arm?

For most anything I need do, one arm suffices. It is always advantageous for one to appear less than one is. This, then, is your last lesson of me, for the nonce: do not underestimate anyone; beware that they are more than they seem. Do not forget it.

And I will not forget you.

Benedict withdrew from her, after a long warm moment of mutual silence. His single hand was resting on her shoulder again by the time she awakened from her physical disassociation.

"There are marks," he said into her ear, "but they should vanish completely in the time it takes you to reach Amber."

Kajina nodded silently.

He squeezed her shoulder gently, then released it, letting his hand drop to his side. Then, he turned, and led the way back to the command tent in silence.

A small sad smile blossomed on Kajina's mouth as they walked, and bloomed for a fleeting moment, fading into serenity long before she tugged her mesh hood back into place and replaced her helm.

Caine had been waiting impatiently for their return, it seemed; he was already mounted by the time they reached the tent. Benedict gave Kajina into his care with a nod, and she climbed up onto the horse which had been waiting for her. As soon as Caine saw that she had secured herself, he urged his steed forward.

"Farewell, Benedict!" he called. "Break Kazar for us!"

Benedict did not reply.

Kajina did not look back, but she felt the weight of Benedict's gaze upon her as she rode away.

* * *

Caine said little to her on the way to Amber, and bore a smirk on his face, even when he wasn't speaking. Whether he was smirking at her or at his own role as Brand's errand boy, Kajina could not tell.

She found it interesting that a Prince of the Blood would be diverted from his duties to bring her back when any of the less important ones could have accomplished the same task.

So either Brand values me very highly, or Caine's services very lowly. Curious, whichever one of these is true.

They dismounted at the great doors of the Castle just before an ocean squall broke over Kolvir, drenching the mountainside with sheets of cold, stinging rain. A groom gathered the reins of their tired horses, after a servile bow to Caine, and a guardedly speculative glance at Kajina.

Caine cuffed him for his hesitation.

The gaunt lad nodded repentantly and led the horses away in silence, save for the snuffling of his breath through his bloodied nose.

Caine strode through the doors, jerking at the ties of his soaked cape, and muttering a curse at the weather. Kajina followed at about a half pace's distance. She knew who and what she was in Benedict's armies, but was uncertain of her status here. Considering how she had been removed from the Castle, she doubted it was very high.

However, from the looks of things, this may have changed.

I have been a faithful servant to Amber.

Kajina glanced around the entry passage as she followed Caine, comparing it to the one in her memory. It seemed smaller and darker than the grand hall she remembered skipping down as a child, more like a corridor in a fortress than a museum gallery. The weapons on the high walls appeared part of an arsenal, not *objets d'art.*

And the front was far from Amber.

Perhaps my time since my days here is coloring my memories.

Caine stopped in front of a set of double doors, and turned to look at her as he opened one of them.

"Wait in there. Someone will come for you."

Kajina nodded, and did not take a step toward the door he held until he had pulled it back to admit her. As she crossed the threshold, she noted that his smirk retreated away from his eyes. She could not judge the expression, and she was in no position to stop and assess it fully.

As she stepped into the room, the open door closed behind her quietly, then rattled, as if someone were locking it.

Kajina turned, and tried the door handle. A gentle turn confirmed her suspicions; Caine or someone else had locked her in.

A quick inspection of the doors for weaknesses proved to be a waste of time. They were heavy solid oak, with wall-slotted hinges and beveled lintels. She was not strong enough to break down the doors. Nor could she remove the hinges — she would have to pry off the lintel panels to get to them, and that was a difficult thing to do when they were carved into the wall. There was no lock on this side of the doors, either.

Kajina glanced around the small, windowless room and noted its long table and handful of chairs.

A bit extreme for an ordinary conference room.

Kajina removed her helm and placed it on the end of the table before removing her mail gloves and draping them over it. She pushed back the hood of her armor before pulling out a chair and taking a seat.

Nothing to do but wait.

* * *

The lamps were burning low when she awoke to the sound of a key scraping in the lock of one of the doors. As best as she could judge, she had napped in her chair for two hours, after studying the stone walls for nearly six. Even subtracting an hour or so from her estimate, it still had

been an unreasonable amount of time to be locked up without explanation.

She rose from her seat and had returned it to its place under the table by the time the door opened. Her still groggy mind protested the speed of her movement, but she ignored it.

Her visitor was a burly balding man in the dress of one of the Castle's servants. He reeked of perspiration and the smell of cooked food. There was a large ring of keys on his belt, but the key which he had used to open the door was not one of them. It was all to itself in his hand, and he carried it as if were a freshly soft-boiled egg; fragile, but almost too hot to hold.

A cook with responsibilities. One who was given one he is not accustomed to, and is a little uncomfortable with.

He threw a bundle at her, which she caught easily. She glanced down at it, just long enough to note that it was a blouse and a skirt, neither one in the best condition.

He grunted.

"Strip off yer metal and put those on."

Kajina regarded him quietly.

The cook wiped some of the sweat from his hairless brow.

"Come on, girl. We've got to get back to the kitchens."

"Kitchens?"

He looked at her hard then.

"Do ye want His Majesty's breakfast to be late, girl? Quit yer gawpin' and get changed."

"I believe you are in error." She indicated the clothing in her hand. "Explain your intentions."

"I intend to box the ears to either side of yer smart mouth, if'n ye don't shut it and do what I tell ya."

He took a step towards her, and stopped when her fingers curled around the hilt of her sword.

"At the moment," Kajina explained, "I am a General in the armies of Prince Benedict. This is why I believe you have erred. I suggest you take this into consideration and reformulate your position."

The cook's eyes kept drifting from her face to her light grip on Svetaslaf's hilt. He licked at the perspiration beading in a corner of his mouth, but stood his ground.

"Listen, girl, if'n yer wantin' to kill me, do it quick. I don't have time to stand around mouthin' 'bout what ye is or ain't. Accordin' to what I was told, yer one of my new kitchen wenches. So, if ye know what's good for ye, ye'd better start actin' the part."

"By whom?"

"Wuzzat?"

"From whom did your information come?"

"I got this key..." He held up the key in his hand. "...in a paper sayin' I was to get ye some proper clothin' and come get ye."

Kajina's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly.

"Who signed the order?"

"It had His Majesty's seal."

She tossed him the clothing.

"It appears that someone is playing a dangerous joke on you."

He shoved the bundle back in her direction.

"No one'd dare."

Kajina stepped a fraction of an inch to the left and let the clothing land on the table.

"In your assessment."

He grumbled.

"Now, why are ye bein' so..."

"I will wait here until someone comes for me. You may return to your kitchens."

The cook sighed exasperatedly.

"I told ye what my orders were. It'll be yer head too, if ye don't comply with 'em."

Kajina said nothing.

He took a couple of steps toward her, and froze when her sword grip tightened.

"Girlie, please. It was the King's mark on the paper. Nobody'd do a thing like that to be funny. There's no way out of this for ye, other'n death, and I think yer smarter than that."

"I wish to see the King," she murmured.

He blanched a little.

"Now, why ye want to do that?"

She looked at the open door, and picked up her helm and gloves in her free hand.

"Excuse me."

He backed into the door, slamming it shut just before her long strides carried her to it.

"I don't think ye want to be botherin' His Majesty."

"My orders stated that His Majesty would be giving me a new assignment. I have heard nothing from him about this new assignment. Your assertions suggest that I should request an audience with him."

He shook his head.

"I can't let ye do that, girlie."

She nodded.

"Very well."

Svetaslaf whispered in its scabbard as Kajina slid it free, filling the mirrored gutters down its blade with the dying light of the room. The cook's eyes widened at the sign of the bared sword, and a droplet of sweat rolled down his nose to hang heavy from its tip.

"I do not think that will be necessary, child."

The voice came from behind her, at a little distance within the room. She risked a glance over her right shoulder.

The speaker was tall, with hair like a burning ember and long white robes which nearly glowed in their pristineness. His eyes were large, and mad with green, as if Arden had been cut into halves, rolled into balls, and inserted into the sockets of his face.

The cook slid down the door to get to his knees, then pressed his forehead to the carpet.

Kajina stepped back from the door, then half turned to face the stranger. Her sword glimmered against her right leg.

He resembles Benedict, and Caine.

She bowed from the waist.

"Your Majesty."

Brand smiled indulgently, then glanced at the cook.

"Get up from the floor, fool."

The man complied fearfully as Brand turned his smile to Kajina.

"Give him your sword, dear."

She hesitated.

"Yes, give him your sword."

After a puzzled nod, she sheathed Svetaslaf, then unbuckled her sword belt and gave it to the cook.

Brand's benign smile widened.

"And your daggers."

Kajina dutifully removed four daggers from their various hiding places, and handed them over.

Brand nodded to the cook. "Set those aside."

He drifted over to the table, trailing his robes behind him like a cloud, pulled out a chair for himself, then sat down. After folding his hands in his lap, he smiled at Kajina again.

"Very good. Now, the armor."

She opened her mouth. "I do..."

Brand's smile retreated in a twinkling, although his voice remained gentle.

"Quickly, child. My breakfast is late."

Kajina felt herself staring at him in disbelief and forced herself to stop.

But, why?

She gave her helm and gloves to the cook, then tugged off her tabard. After doubling it up carefully, she presented it to him also. Her fingers fumbled with the catch to her gorget and unfastened it before turning to undo the row of complicated fasteners down the back of her mesh suit. As she undressed, she made mental note that the marks which Benedict had mentioned had indeed faded.

The cook piled Kajina's armor in the corner with her weaponry as she removed it and gave it to him, then returned to lean against the door when she stood naked on the carpet.

Brand looked at her appraisingly, then stifled a quiet yawn.

"You may dress now, if you wish."

Kajina nodded her gratitude, and took a half step in the direction of her armor.

Brand gestured at the cook. "Strike her down for that." He sighed as Kajina dodged the blow nimbly and the cook's ankles caved under her kick in return. The man went sprawling.

He rubbed at his eyelids tiredly.

"Child, come here."

Kajina looked at him.

"You are no longer a General," he continued. "Your proper attire is on the table. Come here, put it on, then we shall talk for a time, as you have requested."

Her eyebrows came together.

Has he taken leave of his senses?

She walked over to the table, removed the blouse and skirt from it, and numbly pulled them on. Brand's smile slowly returned as he watched her dress.

He beckoned to her when she had finished.

"Come, child. Give me your hands."

Unease prickled and expanded in Kajina's veins like frost gathering on a windowpane. The door was still behind her and still unlocked, she believed. It was very likely she could get to her sword before Brand could catch her. The man on the floor would not be able to get to his feet before she could get out the door, and it was very unlikely that he could move with enough speed to chase after her effectively.

But, then I would be forced to hide in Amber City until I could stow away in the holds of one of the ships that sail into shadow.

As a traitor.

The memory of Benedict's tender mental voice spoke from a deep recess of her mind.

Whatever he does to you, keep your eyes open. Someday I may need what you see.

I will not betray that promise.

Kajina slipped away from the end of the table and gave her hands to Brand. His smile widened a touch as his cold fingers wrapped over hers, and his murky green gaze found hers and did likewise.

"So, tell me of your time in my brother's armies."

The pain which then ripped through her mind was as green as Brand's eyes. Its name was a scream.

Then it ended, as quickly as it had begun, as he waited for her response. Kajina hesitated, and Brand's icy mind echoed in her head so loudly that it hurt, drowning out her own thoughts.

YOU WOULD SET YOUR WILL AGAINST MINE? PITIFUL INSECT.

Then she had no time, no space for observation. Brand was everywhere, and the force of his will rolled over her like an angry sea, eroding her grip on the sands of lucidity.

Just before she went completely adrift, Brand caught her, pinned her down and made her remember. He rifled through her memories, starting with the most recent ones, and digging down as far back as she could remember. He was as indiscriminate as he was thorough, uncovering episodes she had suppressed long ago. He took note of her every thought and feeling as she was forced to review and relive them over and over.

But he missed her last meeting with Benedict. Somehow, she knew this.

Kajina was given no time for speculation. When Brand was satisfied with his overview of her mind, he started to make use of the notes he had taken, building for her a universe of her worst fears and nightmares.

Again and again it was shown to her in perfect detail how she failed everyone she had ever known—herself, her teachers, most certainly Benedict and her King—and how she would continue to fail them by doubting, by hesitating, by questioning, by her very nature.

It was clear no one had ever cared for her at all, which was only to be expected, considering how innately flawed she was. Every mistake she had ever made was diagrammed, magnified and held up as clear proof of her inherent worthlessness; even the position of a kitchen wench seemed far above her.

All of the pain she had ever suffered was her fault entirely, yet only a small portion of that which she had truly deserved.

And then, she was shown things that were far worse.

This continued for an indescribably long time.

Kajina found herself lying curled up on her side on the floor, her throat raw and her face wet with tears. Her body trembled uncontrollably and her breathing was ragged. She saw Brand lean over and reach out to touch her face and she nearly flinched and cried out, but dared not.

He wiped her tears away gently.

"There, there. It might not have to be like that at all, dear child. There is a slight possibility that I might be able to make something of you, and I am merciful. It need only be as difficult as you decide it should be."

He helped her to her feet after rising from his chair.

"I have made an opening for one such as you in the kitchens of Castle Amber. It seems to me that you should be on your way there."

Kajina took a deep breath and trembled as she crossed over to where the cook was now standing. He opened the door to allow them to leave.

"One moment," Brand said. They both stopped. "Because of you, child, my breakfast is now very very late. Though I am merciful, I must also be just. You must come to understand that in all things there are consequences. This is the beginning of wisdom." He addressed the cook. "Strike her."

The man did so, a solid blow to her stomach that doubled her over. Brand waited until she straightened up slowly.

"Again. Once more."

Then, he smiled beatifically.

"Very good, child. Now go."

Nineteen years after Patternfall

Julian looked at Gerard blandly.

"Get on with it."

Gerard nodded as he swallowed another prodigious mouthful of wine, and held his empty goblet out blindly for a refill.

He belched before continuing.

"Well, that left just me and the blonde one in the bed, after that. You know what I said to her, then?" Gerard gestured with his goblet hand, and Kajina adjusted her pouring angle accordingly. Not one drop of scarlet wine stained the snowy tablecloth.

Caine helped himself to another serving of roast pheasant.

"Likely nothing witty. But do tell us anyway, Gerard."

Gerard studied Caine for almost a full minute as he slurped down another swallow of wine. He wiped his mouth off on the back of one broad hand before he held out his goblet to Kajina again.

Kajina filled it again dutifully, but not without noting that Benedict's eyes had fallen on her as she had lifted her face. His mouth tightened fractionally during the brief moment she was not paying full attention to refilling Gerard's drink.

Something Prince Benedict wanted me to see?

Why?

Almost as soon as Kajina had asked that of herself, she experienced the nagging feeling that she had known exactly why, but, like the stupid self-pitying wretch she was, had forgotten it.

Gerard crooked a finger lewdly.

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty."

He seemed to be the only one at the table who found the account amusing, at least until Brand offered a cordial smile. Then, almost everyone chuckled, save Julian and Benedict, who chose to pass the moment eating.

Brand's expression brightened a touch as he set his glass on the table almost noiselessly. Kajina was at his side in two steps, wine bottle in hand.

He put a possessive hand on her arm, and smiled at Benedict.

"What do you think of my new serving girl?"

Benedict looked up from his plate, but did not include her in his regard of Brand.

Kajina's stomach suddenly, fleetingly reminded her that she had not eaten in two days. She pushed the sight of the food laden on the King's Table, and the delicious smells permeating the banquet hall further away from her senses.

"You are wasting her talent," Benedict said mildly.

Brand laughed, and let go of Kajina's arm to waggle a finger at his brother. She took advantage of the opportunity to tipple wine into Brand's half-empty goblet.

"Benedict, Benedict! Always concerned with 'efficiency' and 'optimality.' Is there no space in that iron heart of yours for wishes and whims?" he asked mockingly.

Then, Brand's manner hardened.

"You know that she would make no difference at all in finding what we seek. Do you have any objections?"

"No," Benedict replied.

"No, *what*, dear brother Benedict?"

"No, my liege."

Brand appeared mollified.

"Very good."

He looked up and noticed Kajina still standing beside him, something he corrected with a brutal shove.

"Get back to your duties, wench! You are lucky I don't have you whipped for eavesdropping—or laziness! Move!"

Twenty-one years after Patternfall

Something more soot-colored and gelatinous than water dripped from the ceiling. Kajina brushed it away from her cheek before it reached it, flinging the gooey droplet into a open wall lantern with a listless sweep of her hand.

The guttering light crackled an angry gold, casting jaundiced shadows across her face for the brief moment it took her to pass it on the way down the creaking stairs. It had quiesced entirely by the time her bare feet reached the cold stone floor of the Castle cellar.

She moved through the bodies huddled together in the twilight on either side of the cellar's lone aisle of lanterns, making minute glances toward the darker regions of the cavernous chamber. Gazes turned in her direction as she walked alone, but none chose to bar her path.

And no one lurked in the damp, rough alcove she had taken for herself.

She slipped in, after a backward look, and took her thin blanket from its hiding place, curling up under it in a dark corner before taking yet another look around.

No Joss.

Her mouth drew into a thin line.

Where is...

A grey shadow detached itself from the darkness, and padded over to her on silent feet. It dropped the freshly dead rat it was carrying in its jaws, and sank down on its haunches in a ponderous rippling of muscles.

Kajina reached over, and scratched the cat behind his large ears before she sat up. His bronze gaze followed her movements impassively as she broke the rodent in half, shook out its intestines, and peeled the fur away from its bones.

She ate half, and he the other, before he joined her beneath the fraying blanket. It was not long before Kajina's weary daze turned into a fitful sleep.

But Joss did not doze off. In little less than an hour, he slid out from underneath the blanket and crept back into the dark. Kajina's eyes opened

as she sensed his absence, and half-rose, just as she heard the creak of oiled leather boots on stone approaching the entrance to the alcove.

It was a female member of the Guard, judging from her black and red tabard. Her hair was as short as Kajina's, and seemed a dirty blonde color in the gloom. Green eyes took in Kajina's shadowy form, then flicked sideways, noting the details of the environs.

"Get up."

Kajina did so, doubling up the blanket in the process. She found that even in her bare feet she was a head taller than the Guardswoman.

The woman eyed her and her labor. Her scarred sneer grew somewhat.

"Leave that and come."

She turned and walked away, the short rapier at her side rapping sharply against her leg, as if she wanted to inform would-be assailants of her armed state.

Kajina glanced around as she dropped the blanket, wondering if Joss would find it and sleep there, so she could find him later. The odds of her returning were slim, she knew—few did, when summoned by the Guard—but she also knew that she would if given the opportunity. It disturbed her to think of Joss' being abandoned among the other cellar dwellers.

She followed the woman down the aisle, and up the splintering staircase, then through a number of hallways. The corridors grew more lavish as they progressed, and less immediately familiar, although vague memories began to drift into Kajina's mind as the everyday familiarity began to fail. These were the quarters of those of the Blood.

I used to live in chambers like these.

The guard stopped at a polished mahogany door, and removed a brass key from the red sash around her waist. She held out the key to Kajina, who accepted it numbly.

"I am Sundra. Caredwen will see you at nightfall."

Kajina nodded slightly. She had heard the name of the Night Commander. Sundra nodded in return, then made her departure.

Kajina looked down at the key, watching the progression of her fingers as they rubbed over the smooth, polished metal, making it feel warm in her hand. It might have belonged to her before, but she did not remember locking and unlocking doors as a child. Hesitantly, she unlocked this one, turned the burnished iron handle, and gave it a gentle push.

The burnish and polish were a facade put on the door for passersby. The door's hinges creaked from neglect.

Cold air flooded into the hallway; the two wide windows in the chamber beyond the door had been shattered. Their scarlet velvet damask draperies had been torn into shreds, strips of which flapped limply in the steady wind that flowed in from the garden outside. The view had long gone to sand, weed and bramble.

Kajina took a step inside, and looked down at the carpet. Or, rather, lack of carpet. What remained on the floor was slashed into ribbons, as if someone had taken a hay rake to it and ripped down its length. The raveling threads of shredded rose embroidery stuck and pulled away from her bare feet as she walked further into the room.

The furniture was missing. The paintings were missing. All of the tapestries had been ripped from the walls—some torn into pieces and burned in the smoke stained white stone fireplace, others disposed of in not so obvious ways. A whiff of stale urine crept into her nostrils, and she turned to note the source. In one corner of the room, her old toys, books and clothing had been tossed willy-nilly. From the appearance, it seemed as if most of them had been stomped upon or kicked before being used as a urinal.

She caught up Mistress Fairweather from the floor, and straightened her crumpled eyelet bonnet. The rag doll's merry countenance seemed strained.

So hard to seem merry when someone has used your forehead to put out a cigarette.

Kajina hugged the floppy doll to her chest and surveyed the destruction again.

Silly to want to apologize to a bunch of toys.

It was her fault this had happened. If she had locked her door that day. If she had gone quietly, instead of protesting. If she had behaved better.

She noted the skeleton which used to be a kitten she called Sneeze, still lying against the wall where the door had crushed it that morning. A spider had built a home in it for her babies.

Kajina hugged her dolly tighter.

My fault.

Only then did she notice the large box in the center of the room. She shook her head slightly and stared at the package.

It was wrapped in crisp golden foil, and tied with a wide black ribbon that had been entwined with a flat scarlet cord. Kajina set her doll aside and walked over to kneel by the box.

A small piece of white paper lay atop the package. The only things that marred its pristine surface were the gold seal that held it folded in three and a single scrawled word—her name. She broke the seal and read the contents of the note.

You have performed adequately. Because of this, you are allowed the use of your chambers. Because I am generous, I have granted you the return of your armor and weaponry. These you may find useful in the third gift I am giving you, child. I have arranged a position for you in the Castle Guard.

And that was the entire content of the note. It was unsigned, but she knew who had sent it to her. Who had been patient with her, as he had always been before.

She folded it carefully, set it aside, then untied the ribbons on the box before opening it. All of the items inside had been cleaned and polished, then wrapped in individual sheets of scarlet tissue paper, as if they each were little gifts in themselves.

Kajina found a faint smile clinging to her mouth as she removed things one by one from their papers and looked them over. She fingered the new wool of the Guard's tabard on the bottom, and felt her smile grow wider, venturing into regions of her mouth which had not creased in nearly a decade.

Joss slipped in through the quarter-open door and padded over to her. The air stirred by his passage made the door close and Kajina look up. He sat down on his haunches and regarded her silently.

She looked at him and giggled. His countenance remained impassive, which elicited another burst of laughter from her. After a time, Kajina lay back on the ruined carpet with the tabard and looked up at the smoke charcoaled ceiling. Her smile was wide and warm as she closed her eyes.

I will not fail His Majesty.

Twenty-two years after Patternfall

Kajina stopped outside Caredwen's office, a few minutes early for her nightly briefing. She paused before entering, listening to the voices inside and gauging whether or not it was proper to interrupt. As she hesitated, she realized that Sundra was in the office, and speaking about her.

"...ninety eight out of a hundred, and I would swear that she was upset she didn't bull's-eye two of them."

Sundra's disbelief sounded evident.

"And the way she's kept at the practice wickets all week, hardly stopping to eat or rest...she's like a machine! I thought Geller was the best I had seen. I think she could cut him up and feed him to the fishes!"

"Yes," Caredwen murmured. "She was taught by Prince Benedict."

"No wonder it took a dozen guards and the King himself to subdue her that time she got loose with the butcher knife..." Sundra took a breath. "Why in the world was she in the kitchens?"

Kajina remembered the stew pot of fish entrails, Beldan's bellowing that she should have used a slop bucket, his not listening to her say there was no more unfilled in the kitchen, and there not being time to — but those were fleeting memories, scant less substantial than recalling how it felt to have her head shoved into the pot and held under, of choking on the mess and fighting for air, of flailing her arms until her fingers had closed around the splintered hilt of the butcher knife.

It was very easy to remember Beldan lying on the floor with his guts spilling out on the stone, and the faces and injuries of those who had died when they came for the knife in her hand.

She had been a lazy kitchen wench who did not take her well-deserved punishment.

His Majesty has been merciful.

"The King has his reasons."

Sundra accepted this silently, and Kajina took it as her cue to step inside. The Guardswoman and Caredwen were standing in front of his desk. Both turned to face her, almost at once.

Sundra paled.

"Ex...excuse me, I must be going."

The glance she gave Kajina as she departed was a polite mixture of awe and fear.

"Ah. Kajina," Caredwen said. He looked her over briefly. "Two weeks' recuperation have done you well. The King has ordered a specific assignment for you."

Kajina folded her arms behind her back, but her stance remained in a formal "at-ease" position. Her features remained under control, even though her heart leapt at the news.

I have performed well, yes?

Does His Majesty believe so?

Or...

Her spirits sank dramatically. She was still weak. He could have decided she should return to the kitchens. She did not deserve better.

You do not deserve even that, wretch.

Caredwen watched her lack of changing expression.

"He wishes you to serve as his personal bodyguard. You understand the importance of this position?"

After a moment of disbelief, Kajina nodded slowly.

"Yes."

"Good. Report to Geller in the afternoon, and to the King afterwards. Get a lot of sleep and look sharp. Dismissed."

Kajina turned silently, after a brief bob of her head to acknowledge the order, then walked out of the office. Her eyes were fixed straight ahead, her pace deliberately martial. Her mien was nothing out of the ordinary.

She felt like skipping.

And trembling.

His Majesty believes I am capable enough to assume such a dire responsibility.

The thought echoed over and over in her mind for a time, like a mantra.

She stepped into the kitchen and got herself a plate of the evening's meal: a good cut of roast boar, a small loaf of dark crusty bread and a mound of boiled winter vegetables. The steam floated off the plate as she carried it back to her quarters. She balanced the food in one hand as she unlocked the door.

Then, other thoughts joined her mind.

His Majesty is generous. By putting his own life into your hands, he is giving you the opportunity to improve yourself. He believes this is more important a thing than the chance that you would fail in this task.

More important than his life.

Kajina lowered her eyes for a moment as she opened the door.

I will not fail him.

She stepped inside the room, and closed the door behind her.

Twenty-four years after Patternfall

Kajina had guarded the Pattern before, but had never been past the stout iron door that separated its chamber from the dungeon hallway.

Her breath caught in her throat as she looked upon it; perhaps to serve as a catcher's mitt if her suddenly roiling stomach decided to lurch into her mouth. It was a jagged cauldron of lava, flowing and shifting and the stone floor was a very narrow and thin rim above its surface. No. It was a silken banner of flame, whipping above the floor in an unseen wind...suspended from invisible grommets. And no, again. Kajina's mind failed in trying to compare it to anything she had ever seen before, and took refuge in these things she *could* identify about it—it was large, red, glowed, flowed like fire, and glittered with sparks.

And looking at it made her very uneasy.

"Beautiful, is it not?"

Brand spoke as he walked toward her, his robes rustling on the stone. Kajina bowed at the waist immediately, grateful for the opportunity to look away from the Pattern. Her stomach thanked her for the respite.

Brand's eyes were near black in the lurid light of the chamber and his robes were tinged the color of blood. His beatific smile grew gentle when Kajina could not put an answer to his question.

"It is a tool, child, like your sword and daggers. And like your mind. Something you can use, once you are trained." He beckoned toward it, gesturing her to move out from the safety of the stone floor.

Kajina nodded slowly, and stepped out onto the Pattern.

She very nearly lost her balance.

She had been expecting something flat and solid— and it was not like that at all. It was more like a wire cable; a stout but narrow wire cable, strung out loose in a stiff wind.

Brand tsked. She sensed it, more than heard it, for blood and adrenaline was roaring in her ears. And the Pattern was voicing its own note of complaint. She did not belong on it. The privilege of dying on it was far beyond what her wretched self deserved. And die she would, for she was not good enough, not capable enough, not talented enough, and rotten in her very soul. Corruption flowed in her veins and avarice dripped from her tongue. She was ugly within and without, distasteful, repulsive—to be allowed to breathe was a blessed gift, for by rights, the air should deny itself to her lungs, as afflicted a cretin as she was.

Kajina's feet found their own path for an eternity of a few moments, while she listened to these truths, and passed through them looking for the cold center of acceptance.

I know these things to be true.

Another step, then a pause and a smaller one as the current shifted dramatically...a shuffle as it changed again during the small one.

I do not deny my failures.

Then, something changed. Kajina took a step sideways when the path branched, and she saw the original thread seemed to wind down into nothingness. A few more striding paces while the current ran shallow, followed by a crawling step when it thrashed. All this time, something was evolving within her, something she sensed, but could not put a name to.

But I do not deny my successes, either.

There! That was different! She experienced the odd sensation of *seeing* the thought sprouting in her mind, like a spring shoot through a thick gardener's tarpaulin, and waving in the breeze of her psyche before becoming a *part* of it.

And she flung out her arms to keep her balance, after that.

Fear froze Kajina's nerves. Instead of the Pattern being an opportunity to end her wretched life, it suddenly became an obstacle to its continuing. She went from accepting that her death was inevitable, because of her lack of competence, to believing that if she did not operate to the best of her ability, she would die. A subtle yet significant shift, for it conveyed a deep desire to go on living!

She progressed more cautiously because of this, relying not just on instinct, but the result of a dozen or more visual and logical sweeps across the face of the Pattern for each step she took. The path branched again:

left, right, diagonally right, and forward. After a lengthy deliberation, though which she felt the thrum of the Pattern rattle her bones from the inside out, she took the left branch.

Sweat had broken out on her forehead, and dripped from her nose and hands to fall with an inverted *plop* instead of a sizzle. A random thought wondered if that would be what she would sound like if she fell. The muscles in Kajina's calves and legs were already burning, strained from the effort of ballet-deux with the forces beneath her feet and those pulling at her body from every direction.

The left branch had been the wrong choice, and she pushed her physical protests and mental quandaries aside as she backtracked meticulously. She found that the coldness of selfish purpose, long unused, worked just as well as a motivation as acceptance or a sense of duty.

When she found the main line again, she chose the diagonal branching, shuffling her feet without lifting them for a time, in order to keep her position against the suddenly raging flow of force.

It was fighting her.

This had been the proper choice after all.

It was if it knew that she was going to win this game and leave Amber.

Kajina snapped her left hand out sharply to counteract the teetering toward the right which had come with this thought. The momentum carried her back to balance, not more than a moment before a similar force jerked her back towards the left again.

Leave Amber?

Why?

As if in answer to this, the memories came, flipping through her mind in flat views as she fought her way forward. Scenes one after the other, from her at-that-time perception, presented objectively, as if they were photographs. Bits and pieces in some places, cloudy images in others, the result of things she could not possibly remember because she had never perceived them clearly.

Forces pulled at her; left, right, forward, backwards, underneath — from every direction but above, although Kajina expected that, too, to happen at any moment.

And it did. Just when her snapshot memories took on a new spin, overlapping one over the other, showing how someone had corrected them for her.

Altered.

Warped.

Twisted.

Perverted.

Brand.

The upward tugging force very nearly took her off the Pattern. She felt the soles of her boots beginning to leave its oddly semisolid face, and hunkered down to press more of her weight onto them. But she did not stop moving forward, even though the fiery currents tore and plucked at her, slapping at her bruisingly when they did not grab and pull.

Her steps were careful, coldly calculating, unfumblingly precise, though the coldness within her soul had been replaced by a blistering anger.

She saw what Brand had done to her.

She saw what Brand would do to her, as soon as she left the Pattern. He had not instructed her about where to go when she was finished walking the Pattern—and yes, she *would* succeed in walking it. Another test, another trick, another trap. If she stepped onto the stone floor of the Pattern Room afterwards, his cold hands would fall upon her, and his mind would rip through hers again, setting things back to rights.

His rights.

Her prison bars.

She hated him.

And reconsidered her previous belief. The only reason Brand could put his hands on her was if she let him do it.

She could remove those hands, that mocking smile, that empty heart—if indeed one pumped within his ribcage. She was capable enough. More than capable enough. Benedict had seen to that.

But who would rule Amber? Who would...it was hopeless.

The forces tore at her frantically, but she ignored them, other than to adjust the angle of her outstretched arms as she made her careful, determined way through the maze.

She could not kill him. There was no one more capable to rule, save Benedict, and he did not want it for himself.

She could not run from him. He would find her. And, it would be running away from her responsibilities, making herself, in truth, what Brand wanted her to believe she was.

Another option flowed into her thoughts, perhaps summoned by the hollow ache in her bones.

She could take a wrong step. It would be so easy. So much easier than taking all of these right ones.

One wrong step, and it would be over. She would not have to deal with anything but an afterlife, if there was such a thing.

Just one wrong step, and the time it took to get through dying.

One tiny little step.

It was a seductively pervasive thought, one that numbed her nerves at their edges in its consideration.

And it would not look like a suicide. To everyone, it would seem that she fell off the Pattern.

Almost everyone.

Benedict would guess.

The realization hit her like a fist in the gut, making her breathe deeply and sending tears rolling down her face to join the sweat dripping onto the Pattern.

The memories of her last sane meeting with Benedict had unburied themselves from the morass Brand had created in her head, and they shone pure and clean, when compared to all the others he had corrupted. They were pristine. Unspoiled. Untainted. All of Benedict's words, his fears, his desires, as she had felt them then. As she felt them now.

Kajina kept her feet on the proper path.

For Benedict, for Amber, she had to get through the Pattern and allow Brand to violate her again. She had to allow him to shut her back inside her cage, and feed her scraps of privilege. Allow him to put the yoke back on, in the hope he wouldn't beat her or starve her to death before she got the field plowed. And, like the dumbest ox, not particularly care if he chose to do just that.

She saw the strategic advantage of having her like that. And in seeing that, she realized that she might have done the same thing, given the power and the situation. She was no better than Brand, in that respect.

The end of the Pattern swayed before her, like a cable bridge in a hurricane. And, for all of that, it was still under her feet. An illusion.

For the love of Benedict, I do...

NO.

I am a faithful servant of Amber.

Sleep reached for her when her boots, then her knees hit the stone floor of the Pattern Chamber, but she knew it would not hold her overlong. Brand would not let her sleep.

Nor should he.

Twenty-five years after Patternfall

Brand studied the chessboard again, seeking an escape, his eyes occasionally flicking up to look at his opponent instead. Benedict sat opposite him, his attention focused on the board. Kajina stood in her usual position behind Brand's chair, far enough off to one side to allow her a clear view of the small study where they were.

Kajina glanced at the game when she could spare the time from her constant survey of the room. Brand's play was erratic, she noted, sometimes astoundingly inventive, sometimes almost blundering, but Benedict's was relentlessly brilliant. Finally, Brand grunted and grudgingly tipped his king over, shaking his head.

"You win again," he admitted. "Another match?"

Benedict began setting the pieces up for a new game. Brand leaned back into his chair.

"I don't see how you manage it. How can you be down two pieces and still win?"

"Effective use of force," Benedict explained, as Brand made his opening move. "The sacrifices draw your pieces out of line, gaining me the initiative."

"So you have told me before. Still, I don't understand how you decide which piece to sacrifice or which pieces can be, or should be sacrificed."

"Any piece can be sacrificed in pursuit of the final objective."

"Ah, there's where you're wrong," Brand said with a self-satisfied air. He took one of Benedict's pawns. "You cannot sacrifice the king."

"Only because it conflicts with your goals," Benedict replied. He redeployed a bishop. "Yet, the object of the game is to force your opponent to sacrifice his king."

"Indeed." Brand leaned forward, pondering the board for several minutes before making his next move. Benedict's response was immediate. Brand frowned vaguely.

"So, tell me, Benedict, how do you feel about my new bodyguard?"

Kajina had been anticipating the question all afternoon. It was another test, to see if she was worthy of her position. Generous of His Majesty to allow her to confront this challenge again -- to give his time to the task of judging whether she could ignore his speaking of her with Prince Benedict.

The last time she had failed.

This time, I will not.

Her gaze rested for the twelfth time on the door to the study, analyzing how it could be breached and how best to defend against it. Their conversation began to become a blur in her ears.

"I think it not so wasteful a position as the previous use you had for her."

"You would still rather she were deployed at the front?"

"I would."

Something deep and lost within Kajina twinged at hearing those half-heard words. She noted it with disgust and gave her attention to the small octagonal window. The study was high up in the Castle, and the wall up and down sheer; the drop down, of course deadly. Yet, someone could come in through that window.

She mentally sifted equations of possible wind vectors and corresponding entry angles for an assassin with wings, then shifted her consideration to one who might rappel down from the distant roof. Her gaze remained still as her mind worked.

The conversation grew more distant by degrees.

She was nearing success.

"Too bad," Brand quipped. "She stays."

Benedict advanced a knight. "Mate in four," he said unassumingly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Brand squinted.

"Damn your eyes." He examined the board, his brow furrowing in concentration. "You're right, of course," he said slowly. "The only thing I don't understand is why you lost that pawn so early. It didn't seem to serve a purpose."

Benedict's lips quirked upwards. "It didn't. I don't need all of my pawns to defeat you."

Brand began to flush scarlet. "I...you..." He closed his mouth, then opened it again.

"Kajina. Kill him."

Kajina felt the order a split second before her mind shook out of its preoccupation and heard it, a moment before the inexplicable twinge struck her again.

The end result was her uncrossing her arms slightly from their folded position behind her back, assessing that yes, the order was not a real command, but part of the test, and folding her arms again.

Her gaze remained on the window.

Her mind sank back into its calculations, after allowing her a brief moment of remorse.

I failed His Majesty. I was listening in, when I should not have been. I am unworthy.

The room was deathly silent for several heartbeats.

Then, there was the sound of Brand rising out of his chair, and walking towards her. She expected to be punished for her failure, and she knew better than to try to avoid it — it would only make things far, far worse.

She willed herself to remain relaxed in her stance, not to pull muscles tight over bone. The blows hurt much worse if she tensed against them.

To refuse punishment was of course unthinkable. She deserved it.

Brand caught her by the elbow and spun her around. He looked angrier than she had ever seen him before. Benedict had not stirred from his seat, though he was watching the two of them intently.

"Are you even *listening* to me?" Brand hissed.

He seized the front of her mesh armor, lifted her off the floor, and slammed her into the wall violently enough to knock the wind out of her body and the books out of the nearest bookcase. He did it again for good measure.

Holding her pinned with one hand, he cuffed her across the face, cracking her temple hard against the wall. Then, he dropped her, and she collapsed at his feet, gasping for breath.

He didn't give her a chance to get it: he kicked her, and continued kicking her, enthusiastically, remorselessly, cursing vehemently all the while. Her armor padded the blows somewhat, but she knew from long experience that the next day when she woke—if she woke at all—her body would be black and blue and she would ache all over.

She felt herself drifting away into a familiar peaceful unconscious, just before the beating stopped, and cold hands closed around her throat, digging uncomfortably into nerve clusters. Brand's mind flooded hers and dragged her back into full awareness of the pain she felt.

He suspended her there, then began to rip at her memories, reconstructing the thoughts and feelings that had caused her to act the way she had. She felt the force of his disbelief followed by a sudden stab of exasperation mixed with a minuscule hint of relief when he realized that it was not any residual loyalty to Benedict, but rather a mistaken understanding of the nature of the test he had given her.

STUPID BITCH. HOW MANY TIMES MUST I TELL YOU TO DO WHAT I SAY?

Then he was out of her mind. As Kajina's vision blurred and she again started to lose unconsciousness, she heard bits and pieces of what he was saying to Benedict.

*He **did** want me to kill Prince Benedict.*

I...I do not understand.

A faint feeling of disgust rippled through the haze of her senses, rebuking her weakness. It was not for her to question His Majesty. Generous of him to allow her to live, after such treason.

"...lucky for her and you that..."

He suspected this. A test.

I have been a faithful servant of Amber.

"...tainly not! *You* may not take her to..."

Whatever he does to you...

"...doesn't matter."

Doesn't matter.

Then, all was dark for Kajina.

It was bright when she woke—too bright. The lights above the bed hurt her eyes when she opened them, but she was certain that turning her head or lifting her arm to keep from looking into them would hurt even more. Closing her eyes didn't hurt as much, but it only made her more conscious of the other pains she felt, so she opened them again, just as a shadow fell over her.

It was Benedict's. She hadn't heard him get up from the chair by her bedside where he had been sitting, but he must have. His expressionless face peered at hers.

"You will live?"

She nodded very slowly.

He reached down to touch her bruised cheek with his fingers. They were warm, just as his voice was not. His eyes were unreadable.

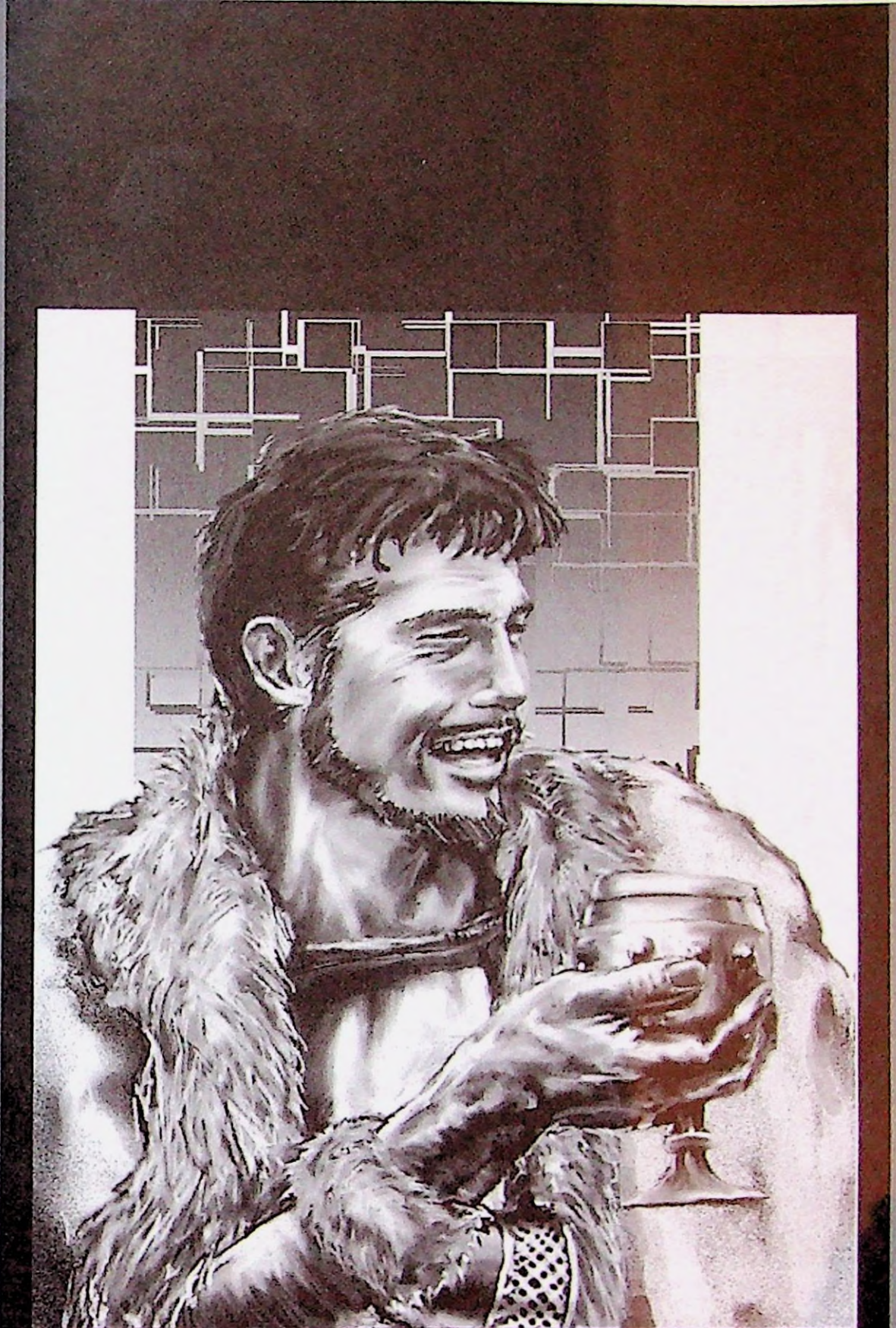
"Then, I go."

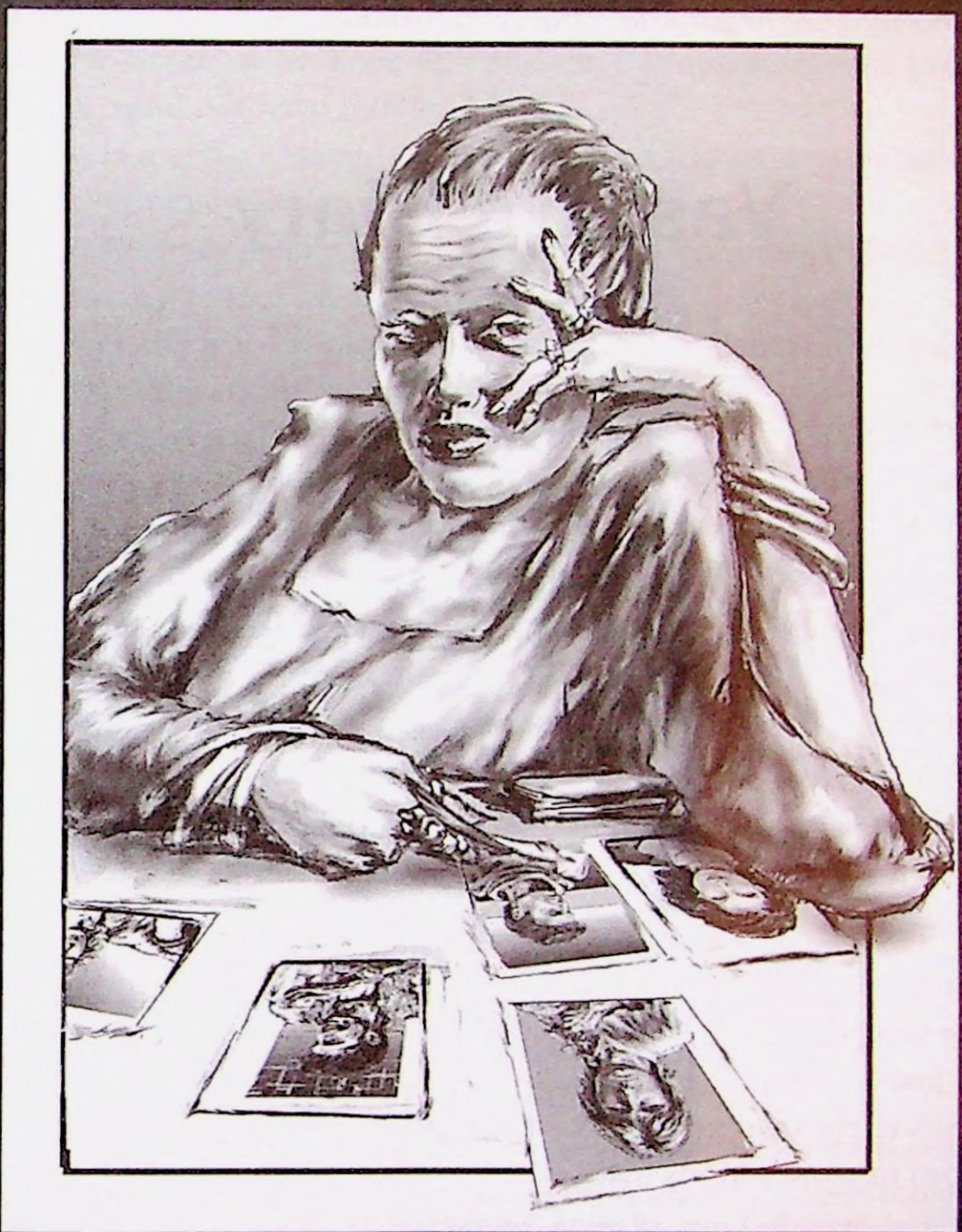
Kajina felt the air move in her chamber as he closed the door behind him. Warmth lingered on her face, or was replaced by the warmth from Joss' nuzzling where Benedict had touched her. She could not discern where one had left off, and the other begun.

The large cat's bronze gaze watched her until sleep prevented her from noticing otherwise.

Shai Ingli *is employed by the Southwestern Bell Foundation Science Education Center in capacities which vary daily. Other than Amber, she's reasonably fluent in Ars Magica, comparative mythology, and things one can cook using frozen chicken. Shai can be reached through e-mail at singli@bigcat.missouri.edu or as Minette@AmberMUSH.*

"Kajina's Tale" comes from a "what might have happened if Brand had won" e-mail campaign, run by Bernard Hsiung. Things are fairly bleak in the multiverse of Brand's Red Pattern. Some who opposed his twisted new order are dead, others fugitive among the shadows and what remains of Chaos— which grows ever smaller as grim, one-armed Benedict marshalls out Brand's order of genocide.





I said I wouldn't include anything by authors who have already appeared in Amberzine. *This is the sole exception—but it was written by Erick as a* player, *not as a GM or game designer, and would probably never have seen the light of day otherwise.*

Vassal's Diary

Erick Wujcik

My story could be framed in any number of ways.

I could speak of my loves, and losses. Or of what I have learned, in terms of skills and mechanics and useful things.

Or in epic stories.

Instead, I'll focus on what has changed me. Those things that gave me insight into myself. Included will be a certain measure of the loves, the learnings, and the lore...

Young, fresh from the Pattern, I went out among Shadow seeking that which my relatives have taught me to value.

Power.

Though not right away...

After wandering for some years (and who can say, given the reversals of time, just how many years), I felt there was no way that I could plumb the depths of my own hedonism, or my own perversions. It was time for me to turn to more serious matters.

In a dark-wooded inn, playing landscape architect with the skeletal remains of my last meal, I confronted demon responsibility, that which I had avoided for so long.

I'm not quite so introspective as some; I like to talk out my problems.

I gathered up the bones in a sack, saddled up, and took the hell road.

Call the Shadow that of the soulwind.

Bones unfractured with wire, skeleton assembled with string, the puppet, still damp and raw, hung from a dark tree.

"You have broken me, pained me, consumed me," came her whispering, the wind using her skull as instrument, "why must I perceive again?"

"I loved you." A lie. Love was present, but not past. Had I loved her before, I could not have fulfilled her.

"Not as much as I loved you," she replied. Now the soulwind went beyond her mere words, and spoke in her own voice.

"How can we compare? You wanted to be consumed," I said. "How could that make your desire more than mine?"

Though the wind played a lively whistle through her bones, there were no words in her response. She had always been perceptive, and she had never been given to answering rhetorical questions.

"That's not really why," I admitted.

"I thought not," came her voice.

"There are decisions I must make. It's time for me to play other games, and you know more than most about what I am, who I am, where I come from."

"Vassal. Lover. That you could offer me immortality," she paused. "It was more... fulfilling than otherwise. Is it true? Is Amber as bright and wonderful as you said? Or did you only paint that picture to make my torture more intense?"

"It's true. I am a lord..." I reconsidered. "Well, a lordling of sorts, of Amber. I did not lie."

"Then I will claim to know you," and her laugh sounded before, around, and after those words. "I'll be your sounding board."

What could I do but laugh?

"If I would be, someday, a true Prince of Amber, then I should come to know Power. How to get it. How to use it. How to make it mine."

"Yes..." and then the wind died for a time.

"I could go out into Shadow and forge an army." I thought of many nights, my various armies marching through my head.

"Why don't you?"

"Beats me."

"Is it because your elders have already done it? Because you don't feel the force you would create could measure up to theirs?"

"Hmmm..."

I looked out at the bleak landscape. Another skeleton, mostly gone, danced a little jig for me.

"No." Benedict would likely break me on the field of battle, but I needn't let him break me in my dreams. "I think I could come up with a force worthy of my relatives. After all, I think I understand the fundamental problem, the reason why no simple force of numbers or lethality can break a Benedict, a Corwin, or a Bleys."

"What is that, hard hand?"

"Any military force is only as good as the system of control that governs it. K.I.S.S.—'Keep it Simple, Stupid'—is a limiting factor. The smaller a force might be, the easier it is to control. The larger, the more difficult. A corollary is that the more sophisticated an army's weaponry, the greater the degree of support required."

"You don't speak with passion," she observed.

"True. I could also say that the perfect military force is only put together in response to a particular task, as a key is made for a lock, but..."

"It's not something you want to do anyway."

"Right."

Gusts of wind, but no words. I suppose neither of us knew what to say.

"Power." She broke the silence. "Didn't you once say there was only one source of real Power?"

"Pattern. That's what I meant."

"Why not seek that?"

"I already have it..."

"Then can you not seize it? Heighten it? Put it in a metal box..."

"Take a higher level of initiation in the Pattern? I barely know what to do with it now..."

"Are there no other Powers for you to pursue?"

"Trump, I suppose. But it seems a pretty sedentary pursuit."

"How about political Power. A throne, perhaps?"

"No."

"Ah, I see why you need me."

"Why?"

While she dangled, literally, she let me dangle metaphorically.

"I'll ask you a question, lover. What does Power, real Power, feel like?"

"Hmm... I'm not sure..."

"What you are saying, lover, is that you don't know what you're talking about. You've never held Power absolute, so you don't know its shape or form."

"I held Power absolute over you, didn't I?"

"No."

"How can you say that? I took you from perfection, to perversion, to the marrow of your bones..."

"Were you truly perverse, you would have taken one not ready."

I knew that. It kind of helped that she said it.

"Go forth, lover, and wrest Power from those who defy you. Burn them. Hurt them. Take Power Absolute. Learn."

A long time passed.

Under the tree where her bones jangled in the wind I thought my thoughts. She was right, Power is only Power if you take it from someone else. And I would never really know whether I really wanted Power until I sought it, fought for it, reveled in owning it...

After a time, my desire came upon me.

"I knew you were wise," I said.

"I only told you what you already knew."

I reached for her bones, thinking to lay her to rest.

"No!"

"You have something more to say?"

"I wish to remain as I am."

"It will be temporary at best," I pointed to the dancing figure on a far tree, "eventually the wind will tear you apart."

"There was a time between my last shudder," she clattered, "and when the wind woke me here. Of the time between I know nothing. If my soul was in the hell I sought, I have no memory of it. Better I suffer here, though the pain be subtle and dull, than go too quickly into a void."

"Your hell might still await you."

"It can wait," she said, "and I will take my time here as another sign of your love..."

Festvalle Serendipite

Ron Levy

At the age of fifteen, I had come to the conclusion that the world was a punishment. We weren't in Hell, though it resembled it sometimes. It was just the nature of things. Of people, of places, of situations, of ideas; some mindless, some intentional, all of it based solely around the concept of the greatest pain for the widest majority carefully and individually tailored for each recipient.

Children are cruel. Not intentionally so; they don't really know any better or have the capacity to rationally control themselves. The worst possible thing to do is to force all the children of a disparate community together in one place where they cannot be adequately supervised. They will be cruel to one another.

Assume that these children are gathered together for a third of each day by the society in which they live, a society fully capable of imposing worse sanctions against the family and the child who might dare to defy this requirement. Now alternate the state-sponsored cruelty sessions administered to each child by the other children with state-sponsored indoctrination sessions. Under the guise of teaching each child a hopefully broad set of marginally useful knowledge, load them down with propaganda purporting to lofty ideals but shamefacedly inculcating only respect, admiration, and devotion to that very institution which enslaves them.

A child has no power in this society. Children cannot defend themselves from those who would molest them, physically or otherwise, because they are not yet large or strong. They cannot testify on their own behalf, because they are children and their words cannot be trusted. The supposed rights of their society do not apply to them, because they are too young. It would be too dangerous for them to travel alone, therefore they are tied to their families' homes. Their world is kept small.

Their mass-produced entertainments are soporifics, opiates designed to occupy them harmlessly. Conditioned response, as well as peer pressure, orients them as strongly as possible towards these useless

pursuits. And what of those rare times, seized moments free of tyranny? Sweet respite? Yes. The world is there. It can be experienced in things so simple as a quiet swim in an empty pool, or a walk through tame but delicate forest. These points of light, so small, so fleeting, so quickly tarnished in memory serve only to make the darkness more bleak.

I was twelve when the bombs fell. Take the people in the previous society, power-mad, powerless. Take them, in the space of a week, to a universal crisis. Their lifetime of propaganda may have taught them how to survive in their own skewed surroundings, but the skills necessary to survive in a land bereft of infrastructure were spread far too thin for their vast population. They preyed upon each other before seeking to their own survival, because it was how they had been taught as children.

I had thought that the world was horrible before the holocaust. Several times, I had not wanted to live. My previous life had seemingly been designed to fatten me up, to make me weak and soft for this new onslaught. How does one compare the pain of slow starvation to the pain of always being chosen last for kickball teams? How does one contrast the sweeping sensation of seeing fire-blasted desolation where once there was forest with the grinding and dulling of city after city of glass and steel cinder block? How does one add or average having quarreling, alternatively abusive and neglectful parents with having no parents at all?

These hurts and a thousand more; for each one abandoned in the cratered wastelands two more arisen. More pains of the body, less pains of the self; adroitly switched as my faculties for sympathetic pain and my desire for altruism responded greater to seeing the agonies of others than to having them inflicted upon me. I saw slow wasting diseases, recognizing them from my book-learning, but had no way of treating them or even easing the pain. All I could do is tell the afflicted the name of their troubles, and would that not be a greater cruelty?

So I came then to realize that these pains were one and the same, before and after. The world was nothing but a punishment carefully tailored. Pain existed for its own sake only, to be felt in its many varying patterns as it rose, fell, changed, and remained.

I had a bicycle, so I could scavenge a long ways, change my patterns, keep moving to fresh territory. I didn't have the range to leave the suburbs, so I stuck pretty much to Creve Coeur county, where I'd lived all my life.

Some people actually had gardens, and we were a decent distance from the airbursted military base. I didn't have much trouble finding food, shelter, or clothing. I could either work for it, or enter an abandoned house and take it with the most to fear being finding the bodies of a family huddled about long dead from disease.

My greatest problem was my eyesight. My father was a vitamin freak and we had boxes of the stuff in the basement. That meant that I stayed relatively healthy and didn't get very sick. That meant that I had a secret, and that made me a target.

Charley Shikany and Greg Fox had been perennially three grades ahead of me, and I'd entered kindergarten a year early. At recess, Charley was the eternal quarterback and Greg the fastest runner in the school. They were well-liked, average, normal. Recently, they'd discovered that marijuana made them feel better, but they didn't understand that it just made the symptoms of the radiation poisoning go away, not the disease. So there they were, stumbling after me with baseball bats in the abandoned house and mumbling threats. A wild swing took my frames right off my head and bashed them against the wall just before I conked Charley in the head with my white oak stick.

He bled copiously (face cuts are always the worst that way) and stepped on the lenses with his hiking boots during his hastily called retreat. The frames I didn't care about, but both lenses were completely destroyed. I was hideously nearsighted without them, and astigmatic in my right eye to boot.

The world blurred. I couldn't read nearly as fast anymore, due to having to hold the book so close to my face. I couldn't effectively keep watch, discern faces, a thousand things. I was doomed to walk through fog for the rest of my days, for there was no way to replace them.

I was riding my bike down the mill road, Creve Coeur Mill Road as a matter of fact. My subdivision was Old Farm Estates, because it had been built upon what used to have been a vast farm owned by some nebulous settler primogenitor. The mill road originally led to their mill, and as the most important road it was always the longest, flattest, straightest, and most sturdily built even though portions of it flooded about a foot deep regularly. It used to be the link between Olive Street Road, Creve Coeur's main strip, and Interstate 270. It was also the street where teenagers would

flat-out their cars to see how fast they could get them on the five miles of straightaway from Old Farm to Creve Coeur Lake.

Though I could no longer see them save as bright brown-white blurs, I knew where the gravely roadways led off to the sparse burnt-out farmhouses, easily targeted sitting alone with only expanses of grassy field around them. I was heading towards Creve Coeur Park (in which Creve Coeur Lake resided) so as to get to the Town and Garden subdivision near the Earth City Expressway. It was there that I first saw the banners, and though they were colored brightly, they were too highly posted upon the telephone poles for me to actually read. They occurred regularly, always differently toned, with chiming bangles accompanying them and flapping like heavy silk in the breeze.

Whoever would go to enough effort to hang banners on several dozen telephone poles didn't seem particularly dangerous to me, so I rode on. I came eventually to the place where Creve Coeur Mill Road ended and at a ninety degree angle right, the park road started. There had used to be within that angle a huge driving field where golfers would practice their shots, delineated by yardage markers and huge floodlights for the evening enthusiasts. In the weekends, the radio controlled airplane hobbyists would take over, for the field was broad and flat, didn't flood, and visibility was clear to the lake well over a mile distant.

Filling that field was a turbulent swarm of unforeseen colors, all burbling over one another. As I coasted closer—easy on the smooth flatness of the well-built road—I gradually resolved the moving blobs in my line of vision into trailers, people, tents, and pavilions; partially through guesswork. Several armed guards patrolled with rifles (they were easiest to see, closest to the road) and a man and a woman, both in jester's motley of black and white, stood at the graveled entrance to the driving range.

They saluted me professionally with their weapons as I slowly approached, giving me no cause for alarm. In fact, even I could see that they were smiling honestly, not in cruel jest, as I dismounted and walked my bike closer. The hair of both was short and black, the woman slightly taller than the man, and their faces were clean and lightly tanned. She stepped forward, and began to proclaim in a deep herald's tone.

"I bid you welcome, traveler, to the Festvalle Serendipite! Attractions and diversions from all over the world are brought to you here! SEE, our

world-famous jugglers, acrobats, clowns, contortionists, and artistes de la trapeze! SEE, the magic of Khopesh the Municipal! SEE, the Inverted Human Pyramid! SEE, the magnificent Mantissa, the fearsome Aluphonse, the elusive Unicorn!" At this, she stepped back, and the man stepped forward like the little statues atop a striking clock.

"Basic admission is a can of food or a cooked dish. Sixteen hours of labor during set-up gets you food, bed, field showers, credit at the game booths, and a front-row seat for as long as we're here."

"How long is that?" I asked. He pondered.

"About a week, I think. Maybe more, if it's needed."

I thought on this. There were a lot of people here, so they had to have food. They were armed, polite, and organized. They'd put up banners advertising their presence and they'd said I could work for food. These days, that was a sacred covenant, and no matter how poor the fare, you could be certain that you'd be eating just as good as the people that fed you.

"Sign me up," I said. With that, his smile grew even broader. He palmed a pen in one hand and a card in the other, looked up at the sun in mid-sky and wrote down the time he'd spotted in his surreptitious glance at my digital watch—about two years left on its seven-year lithium battery. He pointed across the field in no specific direction I could discern.

"Yonder thataway," he said, "is a man dressed in white with a gray belt. His name is Duncan. He'll tell you what you should be doing. Feel free to lock up your bike over there." He pointed towards the abandoned golfing risers, to which I walked the bike and secured it within the plain sight of the armed guards. They both turned and waved jauntily as I proceeded into the Festvalle.

I could only see what I passed closest to and I hated it, for there was much to see. They had an archery booth and a dunking booth, and everywhere the people of the Festvalle were either building their frameworks or practicing their acts, some even in costume. I didn't spare the time to stop and gawk, because I was on the clock and didn't want to begin by being lazy.

I didn't see anyone wearing white with a grey belt during my peregrination, but that could easily have been my personal deficiency. I came to the edge of the trailers where two people in green lizard-costumes

repeatedly flipped to their manacled hands and fought-danced in a circle drawn in the dirt. Their legs and tails both swung and kicked to the time of the thudding drumbeat music of their nearby accompanists. It looked a lot like what I'd heard of capoeira but I had no idea of how they were controlling the mechanisms in their thick, whipping tails. At an appropriate pause I inquired of one of the musicians; smooth, nut-brown, and glistening with sunblock, as to where I might find Duncan. He pointed out onward, in the direction I'd been traveling.

"About one hundred fifty yards there, they're digging the latrines." Joy. Drawing upon my vast storehouse of knowledge about digging latrines, they'd certainly put them far enough away and in the proper direction so that under no circumstances would the smell return to the circus. Philosophically, I noted that if they were digging the latrines now, then by definition there wasn't going to be any crap in them yet.

A broad path had been marked to the latrines with amusing signs filled with bathroom humor. About ten people already stood digging, some filling wheelbarrows and some digging tiny trenches to delineate the future length and breadth of the ditch. Oddly, one was wearing a minotaur's costume, puffed out with foam-rubber muscles no doubt, for the digging. I couldn't imagine how hot he or she would get in there, but maybe they lived for their character. They'd only just started so it was easy to pick out Duncan as the only one wearing white for digging.

He was in the bottom of the beginning ditch, stabbing his shovel-head into the dirt then stomping it down with his dark gray boots. He leaned the dirt free, then used the power of his legs, not his back, to lever it into the waiting wheelbarrow. He didn't have clothing per se, so much as toga-like wrappings about his arms that billowed when he moved. They certainly went with his long white mane of hair. There wasn't so much as a speck of dirt on them or the white cloth hanging from his gray belt, but for all I knew he'd just stepped into the ditch a second ago because he wasn't sweating, either.

"Is there a 'Duncan' here?" I asked, for the sake of appearances. He looked up immediately, pausing.

"That's me," he said. "Who are you?" He turned towards me, and it was then that I noticed that he was carrying a scabbarded sword, long and thin. Apparently the roving armed patrols weren't enough for him. I liked

swords, had always wanted one even though I wouldn't know what to do with it. I'd tried wearing a fake one to a costume party once, and couldn't sit down, couldn't walk without whapping people's shins. From the way he moved, I could tell that he'd worn it long enough so that it didn't bump into anything, as if it were a part of him.

"I'm Tom Billedeau. I live around here. I signed up for the full price ticket, and they sent me here."

He hopped up out of the ditch and looked me up and down, making me acutely aware of my inadequacy as a human by comparison. Being unliked and sensitive in grade school, I'd blimped out and gotten stretch marks. They stayed, even though the year of sickness and starvation had taken away the fat and left in its place sallow, discolored skin and a pockmarked face. I'd always had a sort of ingrown chest and no pectoral muscles to speak of, genetics I suppose; and when I got my system down pat all the bicycling thickened up my legs and behind, without any muscle definition mind you, making my general figure if exaggerated properly not unlike a pear.

He, on the other hand, looked as though he'd just stepped out of a Soloflex commercial, 'complete in form and balance,' except that his skin was lighter and perfect without makeup. He combined the terms 'lithe' and 'wiry.' He couldn't have been over eighteen. He was a beautiful thing in a world of filth and I hated him for it, just like I hated the butterflies for dying in the winter. He and his carnival were going to be here for a week and then they'd be gone, leaving a ragged pennant and a full, uncovered latrine. He smiled. Of course he smiled.

"You'll do. Toma? Get this man a shovel," he said, hopping back down into the ditch. Toma, a brown-haired woman about my height, fetched me a reasonably sized shovel from the cart where such tools were kept, and I set to.

Digging is not the most mentally demanding job in the world, so it left me free to listen to their gay chatter about the various acts and what I should expect to see, who was in fine form lately and the like. It was pretty clear that everyone looked up to Duncan, that he was in charge of more than just digging latrines, and when he called a halt at the end of two hours everyone stopped immediately.

Rest was a tureen of cool water and a hearty strip of homemade beef jerky, protein for long, steady work. I'd kept up with their pace and was pleased with myself, though I was tiring. Looking back we'd done about one-eighth of the ditch so far, and the amount of dirt displaced gave me a feeling of mindless accomplishment. I realized that the digging had all fallen into a semi-supervised, anarchic pattern, one moving forward as another moved back; the wheelbarrows emptied just as they became full and returned before the spare overflowed. Everything flowed like water to an unheard beat when we started again, no standing around stupidly waiting for something to get done. Just as I became ragged around the edges, I was rotated to the wheelbarrow detail where I could use my legs instead of my arms. Many hands made much work light, and damnit, Duncan dug the whole time and still his whites didn't get dirty.

He started to draw me out into conversation, too, just like a camp counselor trying to get the shy kid to interact. I couldn't rationally refuse, either, because he was being so nice about it.

"That's a nice stick you have," he said. "What sort of wood is it?"

"It's white oak."

"That's nice stuff. I got to use a staff of white oak once, and I recall it as very hard, and not too heavy. Yours doesn't look worked, though. Mind if I ask where you got it?"

"No, not at all. I was ten and I and a few of my friends were going through the forests around our subdivision, following the creeks. They're spill-offs from the Lake, most likely." I was already telling him a story, just like that. It was too late to stop now without seeming a churl. "We saw a flash of white at a wide point in the creek, at a place where we played ice-hockey whenever it froze over. The banks were muddy, but we went down anyway and only Mike fell. There was one there for each of us. Vito's was the longest, and had a curve kind of like a katana, place on the end for both hands. Mike's was short and fat, the heaviest. So he wouldn't hit himself with it, we joked. Mine and Brad's were straight, but his was longer and lighter.

"They each had a good place where you could put your hand, or hands, where you could feel the balance. We spent the rest of that summer clearing away undergrowth by pretending it was monsters, so I suppose we gave back as good as we got."

"I'll bet the handle part's been worn by your grip," he said. "So even though your hand's grown since then, it still fits." I nodded and admitted that it was so.

"Mind if I ask where you got that rapier?" I knew that all good weapons have a story to them, like mine, and I wanted to know his. I didn't realize until the words were out of my mouth that I'd just let myself be completely drawn into conversation by asking him a question in return.

"It was made for me by a friend of mine named Morn, a master smith and artisan. Its name is Maleficium, and it, as well as the other four swords that go with it, took him a year and a day to forge concurrently." Well, his reply was all very well and good, but it didn't answer my real question. I continued on.

"Is it four-forty stainless? What's the Rockwell rating?" I didn't know much about grades of steel but I could spout off the names, and if he was proud about the answer he gave, that would mean it was good stuff.

"It's damascus steel, actually." I could tell from his confused tone that he had no idea what 'four-forty' or 'Rockwell' meant. Still, damascus steel was impressive stuff. No wonder it took his friend a year and a day, even though Duncan maybe didn't know what he had. "Anyhow," he continued, "remind me to let you see it after supper tonight. I'm not one of those people who goes crazy if someone else touches their sword. Tell me... do you sing, at all?"

At this, the minotaur (whose name, I had learned, was Nen) chortled in rough anguish. The sound was oddly distorted by his mask. "No! Not the singing! Anything but the singing!"

"You'll sing and you'll like it, or I'll whup the tar out of you, Nen." Everybody, including Duncan, grinned at this while Nen made a show of shaking in his hoof-like boots. Nen's costume was about seven feet tall and very broad; whoever was in there wasn't small or weak. I knew full well the benefits of physical size in a fight having mainly survived by making the fight pyrrhic enough so that the larger person backed off.

Duncan began a slurred call-and-response, the sort of thing you used to hear in movies during the scenes where the black slaves were mining or working on the railroad. It was lower than I'd have put his vocal range, and it slowed down the work which was actually welcome to me at that point. It was interesting to actually be able to hear what the words were. I

sang along, because I like to sing in choruses. That way, no one can hear my voice alone, so I know that my voice isn't being immediately identified as sounding stupid.

The hours passed quickly and the sun dropped low in the sky. I'd long since gotten my second, third, and fourth winds and used them up. I dug with a transcendent lightness of being, lulled by the music. It was fun. I admitted it. Duncan even got me to sing once, to teach them all a little in-the-round I'd learned years ago at summer camp. I shouldn't have expected to be able to work with them for two days while maintaining a sullen silence.

Come a bit before sunset, Duncan called a halt for the day. The ditch was about two-thirds done at that point, and Duncan gave me a little blue chit marking me off for eight hours of work. Upon the advice of the other diggers, I spent about fifteen minutes doing stretches so as to minimize the portent of tomorrow's agony. Duncan, who apparently neither sweats, nor perspires, but glows; strongly suggested that I shower before supper and wear some of their spare clothes while they had mine washed.

They had a tent with a couple dozen military surplus field showers set up, on the only slight incline they could find to run the water out. Fresh, hard, homemade soap lay there, just for the taking, as if it were as cheap as air. Under other circumstances I might have been more wary of handing off my clothes and going into the showers with people I'd only known for a day, but it's hard to sing, work, and eat with people for eight hours and not feel some basic trust arise. Only seeing blurs of other people similarly sans clothing made me less self-conscious and I suppose that was a good thing because they didn't seem to care either.

The clothes, I discovered upon examination, were satin. Slightly worn, freshly cleaned, the blouse was loose and yellow and the pants blue, with elastic snugging them lightly, somehow piratically, around my ankles. A pair of slippers later, I made my way to the center of revelry by following the lilting, musical strains of aroma wafting from the dining pavilion. Various cooks filled my plate with rice, artichoke salad, and stir-fried chicken as I walked about, finding an empty seat on an otherwise full table. Hunger, as always, was the best spice but the cooking was excellent in its own right. My plate was large and heaped high, and I ate slowly both to savor it all and so that I wouldn't need to go back for seconds.

There was a lot of eating, a lot of conversation, and some music, dancing, and playing around. People came and left as they pleased, clasping hands and clapping one another on the back. The people at my table were less facile and more obvious than Duncan in drawing me out, but by this time it wasn't much problem, especially not with the savory white wine accompanying the meal. I told them about the area because they were new here and about how many people I expected to show up and from where; who to worry about causing trouble. It was family, it was festival, I was welcome.

Duncan made an entrance then, in classic form. All eyes turned, attention attracted; his small smile hushing the crowd. It was pure theatre, and he walked right by me. Carefully, as if remembering a promise, he detached the scabbard of his rapier from his gray belt, took hold of the hilt with his other hand, and gave it to me hilt-first.

"Would you watch this for me, Tom?" I nodded, a bit sharply in the silence. He smiled and walked on into the center of the pavilion. "I have a new song I've written, everyone. I'll try not to take up too much of your time." People chuckled, the mood broken, casual, flowing like water. Someone threw him something white. I thought it was a flower.

He took the acoustic guitar from the man who was playing it before, fiddling with the knobs and getting it settled over his knee. I held the rapier by the hilt and scabbard, drew it partially. Its weight was... something. It tingled in the back of my head. I knew it wasn't mine to keep, but it was mine to hold, mine to swing and feel. It had that feeling of desire to it, a blade that lusts to cut like all the best swords do. Long, slim, light, double-edged, the watered steel glinted like writing or painting in the dim light. The sword kills but the scalpel heals, I suddenly knew, almost as if the sword spoke to me.

Duncan began to sing. I'd heard him before, while we dug. That was a cappella, just for fun. Here, he was singing to an audience. He filled the air with urgency, his tones were impossibly clear and intense, perfectly held. The tempo was fast and the lines were short; the guitar picking interweaving but still simple to follow.

Clear sight and passions feigned, Broken heart and life in pain. Set wrong and fused apart, What shall we do to mend this heart? Break it

again, it's the only way To set it aright and bind it to stay. Shattered ruins shelter none No one's father, no one's son.

The night air was cooler than it had been for some time, with a pleasant ruffling breeze. I was tempted to walk into the woods past Creve Coeur Lake but I stopped there because I still had Duncan's sword. He had entrusted it to me, and so I couldn't leave with it or give it to anyone else no matter how much I wanted to find someone's cool, dark basement closet in which to curl up and cry. It was a trap, this damn circus, like Fantasy Island or something.

I could ignore the tears streaming down my face if I really wanted to. I could ignore all the strange things about the Festvalle Serendipite, as well. Like their costumes that couldn't be costumes. Like the way Duncan didn't sweat, get dirty, or tire. Like the way they had enough fresh food to feed hundreds and charged so little.

So I sat there on the large rounded stones looking out at the water, and I remembered why I'd always hated summer camp. Worse even than that nasty artificial fruit punch were the 'counselors' trying to 'help' you. When I heard the crunching on the rocks I knew it had to be Duncan coming after me. He'd seen me slip away after the first verse but I couldn't get away from his vocal range, especially since the song was so short. I put my hand on the hilt and drew the rapier a handspan anyway, to look behind me in its reflection.

It tingled again, the feel of it. Just drawing it a handspan I got a sense of apology, a 'you gotta be cruel to be kind' feeling. I saw in the writhing lines of the damascene blade; billowing pale white and a flash of silvery gray metal. I sheathed it softly. It was one of those situations where the moody person doesn't turn to look because it would be giving up the first point. Duncan sat down beside me and the wind picked up just enough to blow his hair around pensively, fill but not whip his sleeves.

"I'm sorry," he began. "I had no idea you could barely see all this time. I thought you were just taking it all in stride, and I was too busy being impressed. I'm so stupid sometimes."

"Yeah, I'll go with that one. So what are you going to do about it?" This shifted the onus back to him, so he couldn't draw me out again. Trick my parents taught me to use on restaurant managers whenever something is wrong.

"I'm going to set it right," he said. "I'm going to tell you what you need to know and quit playing the mystery game."

"Oh, I'll believe that when I see it," I said. "What makes you get off on torturing me? On making fun of me in front of everyone with a song like that?" I swung the sword hilt-first towards him, right into his hand. I let go. I'd had enough of its strange murmurings.

I could see his fair face redden at that, even in the dim light. "Sometimes you need to bash through walls, so you can pick up the pieces and start again stronger." His voice got dreamy and distant. He was starting to evade, to go off into a world of his own. Well, I could play too.

"'Well, your heart didn't heal right the last time it broke, so we're going to have to break it again before we can set it.' Is that it? Well, go to it, I'm waiting. You're finished with the breaking part, I hope."

He reached out and touched my shoulder through the sheer cloth. I turned to face him, and he me. His hands were warm and dry, with traction and grip, and ending in long, slim, and dexterous fingers. Somehow, he touched me without invading my personal space, like he could move right through it and leave no trace.

His hands slid up to my face, traced it like a blind sculptor might; noting the path taken by the night's previous tears and the current screwed-up tension there. He took hold softly, a finger holding each eyelid open and his palms to my cheekbones. My eyes watered, and my head was frozen. I couldn't move it an inch.

"This is going to feel like sandpaper," he said. I was looking into his eyes, our noses an inch apart. I could see each rivulation of green, each lighter or darker portion, even the tiny flecks of yellow that seemed to dance. His pupils contracted down to a pore, absurd in this light; as mine were probably dilated wide enough to see my retina through them.

His eyes became faceted, crystalline. Optic, but not jewel-like. They rotated swiftly in their sockets, making his tiny pupil shift like a scanning beam. My body was far away and my eyes watered naturally although I couldn't blink. My field of vision filled with green suddenly, exactly the sort of bright light that would make you flinch except that I couldn't blink, twitch, or pull away.

I began to feel the pain that he had mentioned, in between flashes of wet, confused vision and brutally intense flashes of varying green shades.

It wasn't just like someone was applying sandpaper to my skin. It was hot sandpaper, the sort of hot you get when you have some sort of sanding machine moving at machine speeds. It was grinding inside my eye, grinding hard enough that I imagined I could faintly smell the burning oil of a shop-class rotary sander through the pain.

Eventually, sensation went away. I hung in a green haze of rational thought, free of any considerations of the body. I'd heard of the technique before the war. It was the newest form of corrective eye surgery, far beyond the butchery of radial keratotomy. It involved using a pulsed laser to shave the cornea through the pupil to the correct shape. It had only been used on a trial basis for about a year, but everything pointed towards its being the answer to many basic eye problems. Except that Duncan could do it without any equipment.

I felt silk being wrapped around my face, and only when I realized that I was seeing darkness did I know that my eyes had been closed and my head wrapped in Duncan's tasseled silk sleeve. I was either floating, or he carried me, but then I was in a bed with a cover tucked in and I was gone to the world.

The light of the dawn filtered slowly through the silk bandage, rousing but not awakening me. It was the smell of freshly baking cornbread that called me like the trumpet of reveille. I sat bolt upright, pushing off the soft cover, still in the satin dressing clothes of the last night.

The silk unwound easily from my face, each moment adding more light. My eyes adjusted with it almost impossibly fast, keeping me from bright stabbing. I could tell that my eyes were moist, as if they had watered freely all the night long. Usually my eyes were dry.

I was on a cot inside an open pavilion, the sun enough above the horizon to clear the trees, streaking in from over the lake. I knew what it was, then, to be wheelchair-bound for years and suddenly take one painful step to a standing position. When I blinked, my eyes were slightly gritty, a lingering remnant of that sandpaper sensation, well-lubricated by tears.

All the years of my life I had never seen this sharply. I'd had a dozen pairs of glasses from the age of five, each a jumbled mixture of nearsightedness, astigmatism, and a lazy right eye. They all let me read, walk around without bumping into things, so I had thought I was able to see. What I had now was legendary, the sort of sight you read about when

baseball players mention watching the ball spin during the pitch and knowing which way it's breaking.

I tried, but I couldn't stand immediately. I played with my eyes like a new toy, focusing them on things impossibly distant a dozen, a hundred yards away. I saw them small but jerked into sharp relief; fluttering in the cool morning breeze, reflecting from the water. I knew what lines were now. I could see graduations in color at range. The pavilion was a bright white with comparatively dim yellow, to both reflect the heat of the sun and damp the light inside. There were other beds, made, and a half-full chamber pot. Someone had left intricately tooled leather boots by his footlocker and I followed the chaotic winding of each line unable to draw my eyes away until finished.

I managed to stand, noticing only a dull ache from yesterday's exertions in my arms and shoulders. Before, I'd always looked down at my feet when I walked to make sure I wasn't going to trip over anything obvious. Now, with my eyes to the horizon, my balance was totally shot and I windmilled my arms freely.

I made my way back to the eating pavilion, gradually getting my balance back. I almost fell over once but Nen was there to catch me. He wore a gigantic tunic of scarlet satin embroidered simply in white thread, and black silk pantaloons slit up the sides to show his partially digitigrade leg formation. His hooves were cloven and black, solid, the size around of a small plate. On contact he was immediately infected by my mood, a huge grin contorting his simple face. I could smell his coarse, gloss black fur, the animalistic scent of a night's calm sleep since last he bathed. He wrapped a huge arm around my shoulders to steady me, and we staggered through the lines.

The eggs were yellow, white, scrambled, and heaped. The cornbread was soft, moist, and consistent all the way through, not pocketed and tunneled as if the gluten was overdeveloped. I had bacon and hash browns and washed it all down with orange juice, looking looking looking at everything. There were even grits available but no one was eating them. In fact, they were all watching me to see if I would try them. I was no such fool.

The arousing colors, sights, and sounds of the Festvalle were almost too much for me on my way out, and I cast my eyes downward to the grass

as of old to guide me back to the place of duty. Duncan wasn't there though all the others were, so I got into some work clothes and set back to. The hours passed, and I grew more into my new sight with the simplicity of my surroundings than I had with the complexity before. I saw the blades of grass we uprooted, the texture of the loamy stones, the basic dance of the crew. Toma, Nen, Sur, Phan and the rest, we again found that place we'd inhabited the day before where the time passed and the dirt flew and everyone did what was needed at the right time. It took six hours to finish, and there was much slapping of backs and running away to get out of the line of chamber pots coming to be emptied.

I'd found my balance again during today's dig. My eyes were still wet, and the slight gritty tension that came whenever I blinked had faded like the wind. I had two more hours to work, and it was six hours to opening night of the Festvalle Serendipite. I'd already seen them send a parade off down the Creve Coeur Mill Road, so presumably they'd be coming back with tonight's crowd or at least spreading the word.

Toma tried to get me to lay off and mark my chit for the full eight hours, but I wouldn't let her. I wandered about the campgrounds doing odd, last minute jobs and getting fifteen-minute chits for them. I repaired Quen and Xan's (the capoeriste lizards) dancing platform, and swept up the eating pavilion. I got a thirty-minute chit for telling Bilha, the head cook, why no one in St. Louis was even going to try her grits but that they'd probably go over wonderfully a few states further south. In about three hours I had filled out my full admission's worth of chits; took a shower, a nap, and got back into presentable clothes for opening night.

Festvalle Serendipite! It stayed for three weeks, never drawing less than a thousand in audience. Clowns in every color of the rainbow, painted with diamond eyes for each emotion. Acrobats and tumblers, artists and dancers; feats of showmanship, skill, and trust. Nen crouched at the bottom of the five-tiered inverted human pyramid, the two directly above him resting on his thighs, and the level above that braced on his curved ivory horns. Khopesh, clad in a swirling Technicolor cloak, was a master of misdirection, making fire, tigers, and hoops leap, float, and disappear. The Mantissa was a thing out of Harryhausen, twelve feet tall; and it could track the tiniest substance through the audience once shown to it, then snatch it away with an impossibly long jab of its preying, blink-and-you-miss-it

pincers. The Aluphonse was wild, barely controlled by the ropes about its neck. It had feathers of gold all around its horselike body, oddly cocked hooves that gleamed with diamond, five horns all curved and jutted in different ways from its skull, a face that was mostly maw with rows upon rows of ivory teeth, and a high, piercing wail that promised torment to its captors if ever it should escape. Small children cried gratifyingly whenever it was displayed.

During the day, the Festvalle was a theme park with rides and attractions and hourly shows. I myself threw a baseball to dunk Duncan in a tub of water, causing his silken sleeves to droop in a sodden way that made all his people laugh perhaps at a joke I didn't know. Every night the show began again, rising above each previous night, every magic trick that much more devious, that much more to see. I saw it all, even the Unicorn who was never announced but crept his way around the stage, peering at the lower rows until the spotlight chased him away with barely a glance at his dully glowing horn, pearlescent hide, and a quick flick of his tufted tail. I might have been the only one who saw, on the last night when he stayed the longest, the dark green reticulations of his eyes lightened with flecks of yellow.

The lake didn't seem an adequate place to go and be depressed after the last night of the circus, so I went instead to the latrine ditch and found a place to sit on a small rock about twenty yards upwind. It was only about two-thirds full after servicing the entire crowd for three weeks. It was one hell of a ditch.

Behind me, the Festvalle was packing everything into their wagons, ready I'd heard, to head on southward. Duncan crept up behind me soundlessly, but it's not much of a surprise when you know it's going to happen. He settled next to me again, crouching and hugging his knees, then sitting.

"Thanks for the eyes," I said.

"I owed you," he said. "I still do. I started up this circus so I could help people out. Helping isn't easy."

"I know."

"How did you like the circus?" he asked.

"*C'est incroyable,*" I replied. He smiled.

"So what are you going to do now?" he asked.

"Dunno. I might see about starting up a library," I said. He took a deep breath.

"You remember, I said I owed you an explanation?"

"Ayup," I said. "I've been waiting."

"Well, you see, it's like this—"

"You've brought together magical creatures from the lands of myth and people from other dimensions in a circus to travel the world. You give out food and medical attention. You change into a unicorn and perform miracles. The Festvalle Serendipite is the Fantasy Island roadtrip without any annoying midgets."

"How'd you know I can't stand circus midgets?" He looked startled.

"Um. Local reference, actually." He nodded in mock understanding.

"There's one thing I still can't figure out. Once I accept that you can change your shape and become a unicorn, it's not too great a leap to gather that you can turn into other things, like light. But I know that to do what you did to my eyes, you'd have to pulse the laser, turn it off and on hundreds of times a second. How can you think fast enough to turn it off and on like that?"

He laughed then, smiling, with almost a musical neigh. "When I was trying to learn the technique, I had exactly that problem. Eventually I realized that when you sing a note, you don't think of how many cycles per second there are to the tone. You just sing."

There was silence between us for a time, but he broke it.

"How would you like a job?"

Ron Levy *has a B.A. in Mathematics from the University of Chicago and is currently a graduate student in Computer Science at USC. His hobbies vary but always include roleplaying, ritual bath, and Diet Coke. His e-mail address is rlevy@chaph.usc.edu.*

Duncan arose out of Cliff Winnig's 'Dark Amber' game, at the beginning of which the characters were living atop Brandenburg in Castle Brand. After many exciting adventures and discoveries both internal and external, Brand was deposed. The Festvalle Serendipite is a tale of the healing and rebuilding that followed, and the way that Duncan went about it.

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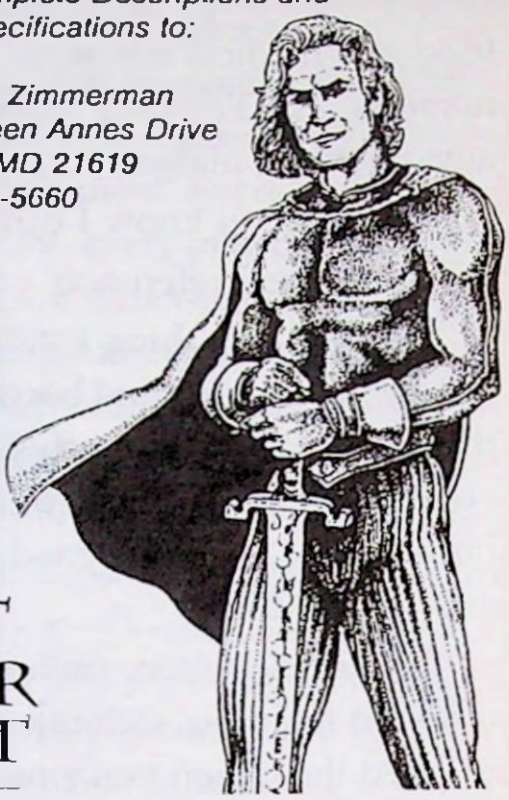

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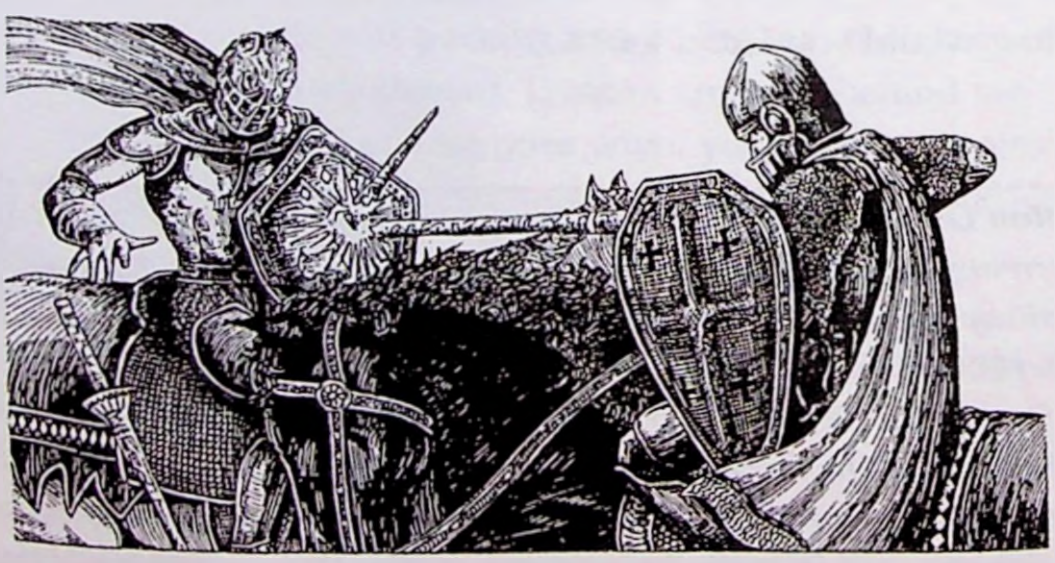

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PERSONALS

Our Friends: Thanks for your support. Without you, love might not have found its way. We named the first-born after Lord Richard. Taliesin & Ceridwen.

A black bird of my desire came, and I wrote a note and tied it to its leg and sent it off. It said, "Reive—I'll be back," and it was signed: "Sneakel, Lord of Amber."

Wanted: Tall, distinguished archmage, Broken Pattern prefered, for romance and ?, Chaos Lords Do Not Apply (especially you, Suhuy!!!). Princess F., Primal Pattern.

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CONTACTS WANTED

GM wanted in 45 minute drive of Brighton, Michigan—Flint, Ann Arbor, Lansing. T. Michael Trout, 7176 Driftwood Dr, Fenton MI 48430. (810)629-2032.

Enthusiastic novice GM seeks established elders for correspondence. Write: KA Takenaka, 289 Ulua Street, Honolulu HI 96821.

I need an Amber role-play group (preferably, as a player) in the Chicagoland area. Steven Roman, 705 Penn Ave, Aurora IL 60506, or (708)-906-6107.

Players and GMs wanted for correspondence, trading of ideas and occasional cross-over games in North Texas. Write Stacey Barnes, 3725 Guadalajara Ct, Irving TX 75062. (214)-258-1213.

CALIFORNIA. GM/Player moving to Port Hueneme around March of 1994. Star Fix, 16 Hoover Avenue, Bristol CT 06010. Reply slow, but guaranteed.

Washington D.C. If you want to run, play, or just talk about Amber, get in touch. Nathan Bardsley, 6411 Winnepeg Road, Bethesda MD 20817-1659, 301-493-9682, nathan@-empire.health.org.

INDIANAPOLIS. Contact: Keith Cripe, 5606 D Cannon Court, Indianapolis IN 46224. (317)-484-2553.

Killeen & Harker Heights, Texas area: Looking for Amberites & Chaosites , or GM. Please write: John E. Ball, 1914 Lakeview Drive, Harker Heights TX 76543, or (817)-698-1246.

INTERNATIONAL

Eastern suburbs, Victoria, Australia. Player wishes to join in Amber campaign. Please write to Andrew Gore at P.O. Box 180, Vermont 3133 Australia.

ISRAEL. Is anyone in Israel playing *Amber*? Contact me. Eyal Teler 25 Nave Shaanan, Jerusalem 93708 Israel. Tel: 02-635763.

Netherlands: Jan Pieter De Graaf, Lodewijk Napoleonplein 19, 5616 BA Eindhoven

FRANCE: Patrice Mermoud, 32 Rue du Docteur Bauer, 93400 SAINT OUEN.

GERMANY. Katja Kornmacher, Lindenallee 45c, 21465 REINBEK.

SWEDEN. Write to: Calle Dybedahl, Arrendegatan 13, S-583 31 Linköping.

UNITED KINGDOM. Get on Ambercon U.K. mailing list: Simone Cooper, 1st Floor Flat, 99 Lynton Road, Acton, London, W3 9HL.

Not only is this the shortest Amber diary I have ever seen, but it may well be the most heartfelt. The character involved, Herryn, is a Warfare specialist. Let it stand as a warning to Amber GMs everywhere that not everyone enjoys plots requiring arcane manipulations of mystical Power.

The Warrior's Lament

Tim Hart

Diary—"A Visit to the Courts"
or should that be "A Waste of Time"

I was at this dumb party of Random's when I got roped into a weird excursion to the Courts of Chaos, in order to go for a trip round Zeke's mind. I can't think why. I had nothing useful to contribute to what was basically a magician's outing, and all it has done is delayed my trip to Tir-na Nog'th. If it has set me back by a whole moon cycle I shall be particularly pissed off.

About the Artists

***Lee Brimmicombe-Wood**, based in London, is an established British comic artist and illustrator. He has illustrated horror and SF novels, and has produced technical illustrations relating to the* Aliens *movies (which are soon to be collected into a book). American gamers will see his work in R. Talsorian's upcoming supplement about the UK. His e-mail address is lee@wyrdrune.demon.co.uk.*

Lee has played and GMed Amber for a couple of years now.

***Mark Riley LeBay** is a recent graduate of the University of Michigan School of Art Industrial Design progam. Since graduation, he's eked out a living in Ann Arbor as a freelance graphic and logo designer and as a part-time "artist/game designer" for the U of M IVHS policy exercise team. Presently he's preparing more illustration work for an urban fantasy role playing game which is expected out next Fall and is scrambling to finish a half-time show drill for the Southfield/Lathrup H.S. Marching Band. Mark's e-mail address is lebay@dip.eecs.umich.edu.*

As a young professional, nothing would make Mark happier than being able to fund his way through life without getting that dreaded 9-5 suit and tie "real job." He's happy to say that, at least on the second count, he's been very successful so far!

***Wendi Strang-Frost** graduated from the University of Michigan in 1992 and says she's been trying to get in the comic book field ever since, with one credit so far for WaRP graphics. Her e-mail address is sodapop@maniac.us.itd.umich.edu.*

She has been playing Amber for two or three years now, and has been running her own continuous weekly Amber campaign for 26 months.

***James Zimmerman** has been a commercial artist for over 10 years. His published works include an illustrated adaptation of Zelazny's "The Last Defender of Camelot," as well as artwork in* Death Realm, Expose, Harsh Mistress SF Adventures, Hellrider, and Random Realities. *James was drawing pictures of the Amber elders before the game came out.*

He lives in Chester, Maryland, and also works as an electrical contractor.

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